

# **School Board Summit: Reflections on the Role of Local Catholic School Boards**

## **I. Introduction**

Many thanks for your presence here today and many thanks to Loyola University for hosting this summit of Catholic School Board leadership representing schools throughout the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

We have gathered on the feast day of Pope St. John Paul II, a saint we have seen and heard, a saint who has visited our city, spoken in our churches, visited our apostolates, and urged us to take up our role in the Church with complete reliance on God's grace and thus without fear.

Confident in the intercession of this great pontiff, I have come today to express my deep gratitude for your service to our Catholic schools in these challenging times & to share with you a few reflections on the role you have so generously undertaken.

## **II. The Mission**

Let us begin with the mission. Perhaps all of us have been involved in writing "mission statements" - a sort of "elevator speech" we might give to a prospect that sums up why an institution exists and the good that it does. As you know, mission statements are always adventures in creative writing. And it is good that we carefully craft such statements and it is very good to have our elevator speech ready when meeting parents interested in sending their children to our schools, when meeting parishioners who might offer scholarship support, when encountering those who question the effectiveness of our schools.

So, clarity about mission is very important. Such clarity includes the truth that our Catholic schools are an expression of the fundamental mission Jesus gave his

apostles before ascending into heaven: “Go, therefore, and teach all nations.” Our mission statements need to reflect the Lord’s mission statement. After all, we are not merely pouring knowledge into brains but we are forming the next generations of young people – body, mind, and spirit—one student at a time; and we are doing so in the spirit of the Gospel and according to the Church’s teaching. We do this because we believe, as Pope St. John Paul II taught us to believe, that it is Christ, the Son of God who became one of us, who fully brings to light the dignity and destiny of the human person. And so we are seeking to form disciples, competent disciples, and to give them the benefit of an excellent academic formation, a safe environment when they can grow in virtue, where they can learn how to love God and neighbor, and seek to lead not self-centered life but a life of service to others.

Evangelization and catechesis, therefore, are not “additives” but are rather at the heart of our mission. They contribute to the atmosphere of mutual respect found in our schools, an atmosphere conducive for learning and human formation, but more importantly they should contribute to the spiritual lives of families, so often fragmented by the hectic pace and pressures of today’s society. We need to extend the evangelization and catechesis we offer in school to families which sometimes are all but disconnected from the faith. For we cannot accomplish the mission of our schools without parents who are “the first teachers of their children in the ways of faith” – as we say whenever a child is baptized.

I mention mission first because it is what sets us apart, what gives us our ‘reason for being’ – and it is for school boards to ensure that everything a school does and the way it is done – reflects and fosters the mission. You are, in a word, the keepers of the flame. If the flame is burning brightly, chances are the school will succeed. If it should flicker, the future of the school is endangered.

On our boards there is the position of “canonical representative” – usually the pastor of the host parish or a neighboring parish. As you know, the word “canonical” refers to Canon or Church law – and, of course, I’m a fan of canon law (!) – but something in me would rather refer to this position as “the pastoral representative” – the priest who connects the school and its mission to the larger life of the Church, to its fundamental mission of evangelization and missionary discipleship. This includes the Church universal, the Archdiocese of Baltimore as a whole, my office as bishop, all

the parishes, schools, and charities of the Archdiocese, as well as the ministries offered and supported by the Catholic Center, especially the Catholic Schools Office. No matter how your school is configured, ACS or parochial, or whether you are on the board of one of our high schools, there needs to be someone, hopefully more than one, in your midst who is constantly connecting the school to the larger mission; he needs to engage you and you need to engage him. The more the Church's overall mission succeeds, the more our Catholic schools will succeed – it's as simple as that!

### **III. Marketing and Mission**

Back in the antediluvian days, when I was in elementary school, Catholic schools pretty much sold themselves. A baby boom was on, 75% of Catholics went to Mass on Sunday, and in my neighborhood, there was no question but that all of us kids would go to the local parish school and that the Sisters of St. Francis of Oldenburg, Indiana, would educate us. (One poor sister had the misfortune of having my dad in the 6th grade & me in the 3rd).

Today, as the airlines say, “we know our parents have choices”. As you have heard previously and will hear again today, we did a marketing study some months ago and it contained good news. The good news is that the demand for Catholic education is high. The Archdiocese of Baltimore receives annually requests for tuition assistance exceeding 30 million dollars, indeed this year it was closer to 40 million. When the State of Maryland made tuition assistance available to economically challenged families desiring educational choice, the numbers in our inner-city schools increased. At Cardinal Shehan, we are up 27% year over year. But for many parents it is a stretch to send their children to our schools and so, if they are to choose our schools, they will look for value. So while maintaining clarity of mission, we must also be clear on the value-proposition. Outstanding educational outcomes are one way to demonstrate value but parents will also look us over to see if we are educating in a 21st century way – paying attention to STEM, STEAM, technology, collaborative learning, finding ways to upgrade our facilities, and improving “curb-appeal”. One of your tasks as a board is to recruit members with marketing expertise and to pay close attention to the schools potential constituency. In my misspent student days, much was taken for granted. Today, nothing can be taken for

granted. We cannot assume parents know how well our students do, or what differentiates our schools from others. It is incumbent upon every school board to have in place a marketing plan that aligns with the AOB campaign while responding to local conditions – and then to assess its effectiveness once it is launched. The AOB is ready, willing, and able to assist with resources and many of you are availing yourselves of those resources. Marketing and mission are really two sides of one coin. They rise and fall together.

## **IV. Friend-raising and Fundraising**

When we fall in love, we're apt to tell a friend: "I just met the love of my life." When we find something we really like, we're apt to recommend it to a friend: "You should really try the peach cake at Fenwick Bakery in Parkville. (You see, I really have become a true Baltimorean). But isn't it the same with our schools? Our families, educational leaders, parents and students are counting on us to join with them in recommending our schools to potential friends and donors. And we are called upon to recommend and promote our schools not the way Consumer Reports might recommend a new Chevy Impala but rather in the way that a lover might speak of his or her beloved or a convinced and loyal customer might speak about a highly favored product.

The first step in fundraising is, of course, friend-raising. In the competitive world of fundraising, those who have been invited in to see for themselves not only how good our schools really are but also what their needs are – are likely to become our donors and benefactors. When possible, someone on the board should have some expertise or experience in the wild, wonderful world of fundraising. I can tell you that, since coming to Baltimore, I've gained 10 pounds fundraising. I hope that doesn't happen to you!

## **V. Fiduciary Responsibilities**

Friend – and fund – raising are related to yet another responsibility that is yours as members of these school boards – ensuring, to the extent possible, the administrative and financial health of our schools. This does not mean that you immerse yourselves in day-to-day operations (this is a temptation that crops up in

many boards from time to time) but it does mean that you make it a point at every meeting to know how the school is faring administratively and financially. And for that you need to review what some boards call “a dashboard of critical indicators”.

Let me put it to you this way. None of us would ever dream of driving a car without a dashboard instruments that tell us if we have enough fuel or if the engine is overheating, etc. So too, we should not dream of leading a school without reviewing a dashboard of critical indicators that includes financial statements, the budget, liabilities, enrollment present and prospective, – well, you get the idea. This is not a substitute for detailed financial statements and reports but a way of looking at the health of the institution at a glance. It is a way of focusing your energy and your efforts. Of great importance is to have a realistic budget and to review “budget to actual” with regularity. For example, if a school does not make the enrollment projections upon which a budget is constructed, then the budget needs to be revised during the 1st quarter. It is important that all the members of the board know all the obligations to which a school has committed itself . . . this includes the hidden costs of insurance, healthcare, pension, etc. As you know from your day jobs, these obligations are real and they are a matter of safety and justice.

Let me say a word about setting metrics. And to echo George Harrison’s song, “Any Road” – if we don’t know where we’re going, any road will take us there. It seems to me that one of the principal jobs of the board is to set goals – not crazy, pie-in-the-sky goals but realistic goals. If enrollment stands at 150, aim for 160 year over year and plot the steps for getting there. If annual fundraising brought in \$ 50 K, aim for \$ 65 and plot the steps for getting there. In other words, don’t use the dashboard to get discouraged but rather use it to set goals and metrics that are achievable.

In the new year, I’d like to begin an annual visit to school board meetings by staff from the Catholic Schools Office, whether ACS or not – to review the audit, the dashboard of critical indicators, and to set metrics. This will be a real stretch for an office that is already stretched and they may need to call upon their colleagues for help – but I think such annual visits will be good occasions for dialogue, communications, and the development of a sound understanding of where a school is where it might be going in the future. Most of all, these will be occasions in which we are all reminded that we are in this together, sharing the same mission, all part

of the same family of faith.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Let me conclude as I began, by thanking you, dear friends, for the unheralded and sometimes thankless work that you do in support of the Church's mission to go and teach all nations. May the Lord bless you for this work and through the action of the Holy Spirit may it bear good fruit in the lives of the families and young people we are privileged to serve.

God bless you and keep you always in his love!