

Speaker urges educators to teach students empathy

INDIANAPOLIS – Daniel Pink, an author of books on the changing work world, told Catholic educators March 27 at the National Catholic Educational Association convention in Indianapolis they need to prepare students differently to succeed in today's work force.

In a keynote address during the March 25-28 convention attended by more than 7,000 educators, Mr. Pink said the work environment is changing from its one-time emphasis on “logical, linear and spreadsheet-type abilities” to more “artistry, empathy, inventiveness and big-picture thinking.”

Jobs in America that once relied on following a certain set of steps to perform are being outsourced to other countries where they can be performed more cheaply, he said.

To prepare students for the changing work force, he said educators need to put more focus on developing those “right brain” skills where a person's creativity and humanity make a difference.

Above all, students need to learn empathy, he said, describing it as “the ability to stand in someone's shoes, to feel with their hearts and see with their eyes.”

“Think of how empathy-centered many of your schools are. Think about the Christian-Catholic teaching. Think of the life of Jesus and how it's really a lesson in empathy. Empathy makes the world a better place,” he added.

Mr. Pink said the changing work world is reflected in some medical schools where students are getting part of their training in art museums to help them develop their observational and diagnostic skills in hopes of helping them be more caring doctors.

He also pointed out that two-thirds of the incoming students at a prestigious engineering college were accepted in part because of their ability to play a musical instrument which reflected their diverse talents and artistic interests.

Those approaches reflect a “symphony” perspective of education, using “big-picture thinking” to create patterns of meaning and purpose, he said.

Mr. Pink also said people are searching more and more for the meaning and the purpose of their lives, even as they experience stunning prosperity compared to previous generations.

“The standard of living in middle-class families in America is breathtaking,” Mr. Pink said, noting that 69 percent of Americans own homes and 87 percent have mobile phones.

Still, “there’s a gap between rising prosperity and stagnating satisfaction,” he added. “That gap is a big deal. That gap explains why there is a widespread search for meaning, purpose and significance in America today. People have been liberated by prosperity but not fulfilled by it.”

In that search for fulfillment, Mr. Pink advocates that people should pursue a career they love. He also recommends that people become involved in an effort where they feel they are part of something larger than themselves.

In an interview with The Criterion, archdiocesan newspaper of Indianapolis, Mr. Pink stressed the importance of helping others.

“The ethic of service is really important,” he said. “One of the ways that people live that level of satisfaction is through service to others.”

Mr. Pink’s message struck a chord with teachers.

Shelley Sargent, the art teacher at St. Rose of Lima School in Franklin, Ind., loved the emphasis on creativity in schools.

Gloria Adams, a first-grade teacher at St. Rose of Lima, liked Mr. Pink’s emphasis about using the brain’s right side.

“As a Catholic school, we have a lot of ways we can do that,” she said, particularly through the liturgy, reaching out to the community and “the way we try to teach our kids about the way Christ lived.”