What do K-12 Catholic Schools Need from Catholic Higher Education In the Support and Development of Leaders?

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In order to reflect on the needs of Catholic elementary schools, one must understand the constituents in our current schools: students, parents, teachers and administrators.

Students: inquisitive, social, digital natives who have been raised on fast-paced interactions. They learn by doing and rely more on peer groups for approval than previous generations. While communication and collaboration skills are imperative for the 21st Century, they are poor listeners and feel that their way is better than anything that might be proposed by others.

Parents: just when we got used to dealing with parents of entitlement and helicopter parents, along come the Gen X parents into our schools. They are consumers of products and expect good “customer service.” They look at school as an investment for their child and feel they should explore all options for education. They are largely un-churched or “cultural Catholics” who do not view mass attendance as a valid measure of their Catholicity. There is usually a disconnect between this view and that of the pastor.

Teachers: have had a solid formation in basic education courses. Most are creative, competent professionals who enjoy being part of learning communities. Many are overwhelmed by the routine tasks and clerical work that are essential parts of teaching. They are concerned that it takes from the time they would rather utilize planning creative ways of helping students learn better. Many are burdened by student loans and struggle with the starting salaries in Catholic schools.

Administrators: principals and pastors are called upon to use skill sets for which they were not trained. Development and marketing is taking an increasingly large portion of their time. Communication between them on matters of importance is becoming crucial, yet they often do not have experience in dealing with minor issues in a collaborative way. Being able to articulate a shared vision to the community and possible benefactors is essential for the future of their schools, but many do not feel comfortable in this role. Some do not feel comfortable in their role as the spiritual leader of the school community.

Institutions of Catholic Higher Education can help teachers and administrators in various ways. Many are already doing so successfully.

- On-going professional development for teachers already in the field. This can be offered through a speakers’ bureau for local schools and at diocesan in-service days.

- Support for newly hired teachers. A seminar for graduates in their first year of teaching, where ideas and frustrations can be shared in a safe environment, would be beneficial.

- Programs of debt forgiveness for students who accept positions in Catholic schools.
• Special regional programs for principals seeking to become certified in administration. Many come up through the teaching ranks and need a program tailored to their experience and in conformity with state guidelines.

• Opportunities for pastors and principals to attend thought-provoking workshops together. Financing, collaborative ministry, Catholic identity, marketing and visioning are all possibilities.

• Assistance should not be limited to the school of education. There are many experts throughout the university who might lend their insights to Catholic administrators struggling with non-instructional issues.