A Time to Renew

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A caveat as I begin this presentation, I recently ‘celebrated’ one of those benchmark birthdays. I say ‘celebrated’ because it wasn’t one of those festive days. You see- I have had to come to grips with the idea that I am not as young as I think I am in my own mind. I have to admit that I have now seen several of the pendulum swings that are so common in education. I now really understand that meaning of “Everything old is new again”. As a result- I fear that I am becoming crotchety and less patient! I may now be prone to yelling at neighbor kids to “get off my lawn”. I will not confirm, however, if I am eligible for an AARP membership. So, my apologies if I drift into one of those “soap box” moments, which usually means my kids are rolling their eyes with a resigned expression of “There he goes again”.

A time to renew- maybe a curious choice for a conference theme on inclusion and Catholic schools, especially when many Catholic schools are struggling with the idea of how to address the needs of students with disabilities. Born out of a summer in the bleachers at high school summer league basketball games, this theme presented itself from the typical conversations that arise at such events. For those you that have attended such events, parents will sit in the bleachers between games and solve the problems of the world. And at Catholic high schools, those problems will eventually point back to what we need to do to save the Church.
So, at one such game, a small group of parents were discussing the concerns that face the Church: a declining population, low rates of mass attendance, and decreasing numbers of people participating in the sacraments. Not a very rosy picture and a little overwhelming for those of us that love and serve our schools. Instead of feeling a sense of “doom and gloom”, I paused and had a realization.

As most of you who are Catholic Educators know, we all have side jobs to help supplement the income. For me, I have been working as an instructional design consultant for a high school religion textbook and I had just been working on a new text on Church history. As I poured over the text book pages dealing with the sometimes-turbulent history of our Church, this is where it struck me. This is not the first time (nor probably the last time) that the Church will face significant challenges, both externally and internally. The Church, over time, has faced significant challenges that have threatened its very existence. Remember, that we have had two popes before and there have certainly been other scandals that have left the Church with a black eye. But, in these times of challenge, through what I know to be the Holy Spirit, the Church has rebounded and found ways to renew itself and has become stronger.

*Veni, Sancte Spiritus!*

So, as this conversation in the bleacher continued, I began to ponder how we might be being called to something bigger. What happens if this call to inclusion, which has been a force that has called us together today, is really something much bigger than affording a welcome to those
students with disabilities. What if this were a call from the Spirit for us to help “renew the face of the Earth?” In this case, our schools. The Spirit moves in wonderful and mysterious ways.

I don’t think that it was coincidental that after this conversation that my mind turned to many of the readings and songs that we hear at Pentecost. I kept thinking about how this work in inclusionary approaches may be a way to renew our mission in Catholic schools.

“Come, Lord Jesus, Send us your Spirit and Renew the face of the Earth”

The National Catholic Partnership on Disability’s statement on Inclusion reminds us:

Inclusion calls us to provide access and integration into the sacramental, formational, educational, pastoral, ministerial and communal life of the Church, offering accommodations when needed to enable the person with a disability to achieve the fullest measure of personal participation. “Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary.” Inclusive communities celebrate the diversity of gifts and support the needs of all members.

What if this call to inclusion is challenging us to renew our sense of mission and double of efforts to embrace our Catholic Identity?

Let’s be honest-in this era of accountability spurred on by “No Child Left Behind” and now “Every Student Succeeds Act”, sometimes the unique feature of who we are, as Catholic schools, has escaped us. With an almost hyper-vigilant focus on academic excellence, has our sense of Catholic Identity sometime been watered down? Can we really embrace the idea of “Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of is necessary” when we are afraid that our test scores will be driven down by accepting students with disabilities?
Our minds quickly go the practical and logistical. How will we pay for this? What will our stakeholders say? What will happen if become known as the special education school? How will this impact enrollment? Unfortunately, these are real quotes that I have heard.

Maybe this tension that we are experiencing between what appears to be the polar opposites of “academic excellence” and “Catholic Identity” is really the challenge of the Holy Spirit. As Pope Francis reminds us, “The Holy Spirit upsets us because it moves us, makes us walk, pushes the Church forward.” Perhaps our job is to heed this call for inclusion to ensure that we are moving things forward.

Let’s go back to the basics. The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education’s document, The Catholic School states…

…a school is not only a place where one is given a choice of intellectual values, but a place where one has presented an array of values which are actively lived. The school must be a community whose values are communicated through the interpersonal and sincere relationships of its members and through both individual and corporative adherence to the outlook on life that permeates the school. (32)

As Catholic educators, we are called to higher standard. In addition to academic excellence, we are responsible with catechesis. We are responsible for teaching the Faith-not only through “religion class” but through our witness. Remember the words attributed to St. Francis, “Preach the Gospel always, use words when necessary.”

What are the values that are expressed by the members of the school community when those with disabilities are not afforded a full welcome? What are the lessons learned when we don’t accept
members of our community because they are perceived to have a negative impact on the way people perceive our school? What are we really teaching?

The reality of all of this that most us will personally encounter disability in one form or another over the course of our lives. One writer likes to refer to the fact that we are all only Temporarily Able-Bodied. How do we prepare ourselves and our students for the time that we experience disability? By hiding disability, we give the message that there is something wrong or disordered about the disability. This is in direct conflict with the words of St. John Paul II- “we are all unique and unrepeatable.” Think of the word-unrepeatable. There is intentionality to our creation and we must honor that. We need to be able to give the message that disability is a natural condition and is part of life.

I worry about a generation of students who attend Catholic school and have not had significant interactions with people with disabilities. Without these daily and on-going interactions, how will these students effectively be members of society? How can we claim to respect life in all forms, when we don’t know how to interact with those with disabilities? Will we have a tendency to ignore those with disabilities because we don’t know how to interact? Or worse, we will objectify those with disabilities by being “inspired by their hardships”? Without genuine and authentic relationships with those with disabilities, we may only marginalize those individuals further.

An interesting case in point, my mother-in-law, who is 94, lives with us. She joined our household of five children and two dogs 24 years ago, when she was an active 70-year old. She
has given our children an amazing testimony of love, faith and work ethic. Because our children were raised with their Nona, they thought it was “normal” for grandmothers to live with you. They couldn’t understand why everyone’s grandmother didn’t live with them. It was only recently that we had to prohibit her from going to the basement to do the laundry. She is a consistent supporter of all the events in which our kids have participated. She is an avid sports fan and still, to this day, loves going to high school games. Recently, we have had to start to using a transport wheel chair to get her to games because she can tire walking longer distances.

When we starting using that chair, I noticed something. At the Catholic high school where our kids have attended, people, especially students didn’t know how to respond to her. Going through doors, which are not equipped with automatic switches (that’s a whole other story!), students didn’t realize that they should probably hold doors or maybe offer to help or at the very least, not walk directly in front of the wheelchair. I just chalked this up to the self-centered nature that can accompany adolescence. It didn’t strike me until we were heading to a play-off game for my son’s basketball team. The game was being held at a public school not so far away. First, I noticed that the parking lot was so much more accessible with curb cuts more available than our school. But the next thing that I noticed, was the reaction from the students of that school. Students acknowledged my mother-in-law’s presence by giving her a clear path as I was pushing her towards the school. They looked at her and smiled and offered to hold doors so that we could get in. I really thought this had to do with the fact that, as a public school, these students were exposed to other students with disabilities on a regular basis. There was a comfort and ease around that wheelchair that I not seen at our own Catholic high school.
Now, our high school is a really good school and I certainly don’t blame the school for not equipping students to know how to open doors. But, it is a larger issue. If we claim as Catholics to respect life, how are we enculturating this value with our students when there are people missing from the community?

Remember the challenge of Pope Francis, the Holy Spirit can make us uncomfortable as a way to move us forward. I think that this is why I was gravitating to the songs from Pentecost. Perhaps this our challenge to “Renew the Face of the Earth.” As our opening song implores,

*Fill us with the fire of your love, burn in us now,
Bring us together
Come to us, Dwell in us, Change our lives, Oh, Lord*

I think that the Spirit is truly moving. There are many paths around serving students with disabilities in Catholic schools that are starting to converge. Presently, there are several organizations that specifically support inclusive approaches in Catholic schools. Those organizations are coming together and now sponsor an Inclusion Summit at the NCEA National Convention, (usually on the Monday evening before the opening of the convention). Colleges and universities are now engaged in dialog around this issue. Truly the Spirit must be at hand here. Institutions of higher education are notorious for not collaborating. I am so pleased that we have our colleagues from the University of Notre Dame and the University of Kansas here to share their expertise in this area. And certainly, there are the efforts of the National Catholic Educational Association. NCEA has an advisory board for the exceptional learner, sponsored a conference on exceptional learners and is increasing the number of publications on this issue.
At last year’s conference, I presented a framework to start think about an integrated approach to build systems to support students with disabilities. This framework served as a basis of the Exceptional Learners white paper that was published by NCEA in April.

The comprehensive system to support students with disabilities (Boyle, 2016), outlined in the white paper, includes articulated professional development needs and supports from the classroom level to the national organizational level. By adopting a common model of integration, new collaboration among Catholic schools can be fostered. A unified approach opens the doors for the creation of shared service delivery systems that can maximize limited resources in the service of students with disabilities. A common framework provides a shared vocabulary about serving students with disabilities and a unified voice that will help clearly articulate this mission to potential funders and policy writers.

An additional strategy that risen out of all of this work has been the completion of the first national benchmarking survey on students with disabilities in Catholic schools. This inaugural survey was created in order to benchmark the current status of programs and services for addressing the needs of students with disabilities in the Catholic school setting. The results will be released in a few weeks at the NCEA Catholic Leadership Summit in Phoenix. The survey was designed to assess four areas:

- Demographics,
- Policies, Procedures and Protocols,
- Services,
- Challenges and Opportunities.
Here is a quick summary of the findings of the survey.

**Demographics-Whom do we serve?**

The results of this survey are consistent with past assessments of this area. Catholic schools are continuing to enroll students with disabilities from a number of eligibility categories. The results suggest that the schools that responded to this survey tend to enroll students from high incidence disabilities categories (i.e. specific learning disabilities, other health impaired, and speech and language impairment). However, the respondents for this survey indicated that they were less likely to enroll students from low incidence categories (i.e. sensory impairments and intellectual disabilities).

**Policies, Procedures and Protocols**

Three quarters of the superintendents noted that there were policies about students with disabilities in Catholic schools. However, only one-third of the respondent superintendents had specialized policy manuals devoted to this topic. Additionally, only one-third of the surveyed principals indicated that the school’s handbook had policies about students with disabilities. It can’t be enough to have willing teachers and dedicated leaders implement programming for students with disabilities. Policy helps to articulate the response to requests for services. Procedures concretize the policy in observable steps, and protocols are the concrete products through which the policy is realized. Creating a repository of model policies, procedures, and protocols can help identify promising models to assist other Catholic schools who may lack the resources to create these on their own.
It was interesting to note that schools tended to use universal screeners and discipline records at lower rates than other assessment tools to diagnose potential disability. These sources can be helpful in the evaluation of potential disability. It would be interesting to note if schools don’t have access to universal screeners or to determine if there are other reasons why these are not being utilized to a greater extent. Further, it would be important to find out how Catholic schools are maintaining discipline records and tracking that data in an on-going fashion. Again, this can be a very practical data source that is useful, not only in disability determination, but in shaping positive behavioral supports for all students.

In reviewing the results of the survey, there appears to be some needed work in the area of advocacy. Principals reported that they viewed accessing disability determination services through the public school as cumbersome. There might be a need to review local Catholic school procedures to work on a seamless interface with the public-school child find process. Additionally, equipping Catholic school leaders with additional background in special education law can provide the basis for more effective advocacy.

**Services**

It is clear that the principals in this sample are reporting a wide variety of services for students with disabilities. It is also noteworthy that the respondents indicated that most of these services were provided for by the school budget as opposed to other sources.
We need in-depth discussion about how to balance the call to provide Catholic education to all who desire it and the requirement to manage fiscally responsible programs is needed at this juncture. As the U.S. bishops remind us,

    Costs must never be the controlling consideration limiting the welcome offered to those among us with disabilities, since provision of access to religious functions is a pastoral duty (USCCB, 1998, p.2).

The ultimate question is how to balance this charge with the very real financial concerns that face the Catholic school principal. It would seem that bringing together a forum for Catholic school staff, diocesan leaders, national organizations, universities and various foundations might help to begin the discussion.

**Challenges and Opportunities**

An interesting finding is related to connecting disability services to Catholic social teaching. Only about half of the principals indicated that their teachers and administrators received professional development in this area. The Church has a number of documents related to this, and they would seem the logical fit to provide the context for serving students with disabilities within this framework. Connecting this level of programming to Catholic identity provides the “why” to staff and is the perfect starting point. It seems that it would be critical to offer formation opportunities for staff and administrators in this area. Being able to explore various Church documents related to disability might provide a mindset change in the quest to develop this level of understanding.
The results of this survey are an interesting starting point. The results certainly suggest the need for frequent and on-going assessment in these areas of serving students with disabilities in Catholic Schools. It would seem that on-going assessments of areas of attitudes and dispositions might be important to document shifts in this kind of thinking. Additionally, on-going assessments of these areas might help to identify changes in programming, especially in direct programming and services to students, as well as important professional development to staff and administrators.

The overall results of this survey suggest that Catholic schools are taking seriously their call to begin to open their doors to all who desire a Catholic education. However, there is more work to be done in this area. Clearly, there is a need to continue to build the capacity of the leaders and staff of Catholic schools to address a wider range of student need. Better developed systems of advocacy at the local school level can help Catholic school leaders to better navigate the current systems of special education available in the public-school sector.

It is heartening to see the positive attitudes towards serving students with disabilities in Catholic schools. Of the respondents, a majority indicated that there is a need for Catholic schools to embrace this responsibility to serve. Hopefully, the results of this survey have highlighted some of the promising shifts in thinking and in programming for students with disabilities. To echo the words of one of the responding superintendents,

...We need to tell our stories and celebrate the GOOD NEWS! We need to welcome families from all walks of life because that is our Gospel call and what truly makes authentic Catholic schools.
This survey suggests that there are good things going on in our Catholic Schools and, to a certain extent, I may be preaching to the choir. But- there is still much work to be done. We continue to be challenged with the words of the U.S bishops in “A Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities:

We are a single flock under the care of a single shepherd. There can be no separate Church for persons with disabilities.

This is the challenge-to ensure that there is only one Church where all are welcome. We invite the presence of the Holy Spirit to guide our work, to burn within us, to change not only our lives, but the lives of those that we serve.

In conclusion, as you listen to the different presenters and network with your colleagues today, I pray the Holy Spirit will be with you- to challenge you, to make you uncomfortable, and to ultimately comfort you. Let the Spirit use us to help renew the face of the earth. As the first reading in our prayer service this morning reminds us: Everything has its season. I think that now might be that season- as we seek new ways to welcome all students to our schools.

Thank you.