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**Measuring Religious Mission Effectiveness in the United States:
Are Catholic Schools Making a Difference?**

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Abstract

With the growing emphasis on accountability and assessment in education, Catholic schools must consider the added dimension of religious mission and the extent to which they are effective. This paper analyzes issues related to measuring religious mission effectiveness in the United States. Specifically, the paper summarizes previous research, identifies challenges, provides examples of how these challenges are being met, outlines the value of assessing religious mission, and concludes with recommendations and questions for reflection.

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1. Introduction

The enactment of the *No Child Left Behind* federal legislation in 2002 has focused the nation's attention on assessment and accountability related to student achievement in public schools. Although the law does not impact Catholic schools directly, its influence can be felt. In this increasingly competitive educational marketplace, Catholic schools are expected by their stakeholders to meet or exceed public schools in terms of academic outcomes, especially as educational costs to continue to climb.

For Catholic schools, measuring academic achievement represents only part of the equation for assessing mission effectiveness. The adjective, *Catholic*, connotes a religious dimension of our *raison d' être* for which we are also accountable. "Catholic schools live in two worlds. Understanding the claims of these two worlds, and offering appropriate responses to God and to Caesar, are unique and important tasks for Catholic school leaders" (Guerra, 2000, p. 83). Archbishop J. Michael Miller, Secretary for the Congregation for Catholic Education, believes that Catholic schools need to provide quality assurance for the religious dimension of their institutional mission and evidence that each school is fulfilling its apostolic purpose. "This collaborative and systematic exercise of assessing a school's catholicity would serve to identify, clarify, and strengthen its effectiveness in its service of Christ and the Church" (Miller, 2006, p.63). The National Catholic Educational Association (2004) issued an official statement that contextualizes accountability and assessment for Catholic schools in the United States and "affirms Catholic educators' commitment to thoughtful and comprehensive measures of accountability in carrying out their mission of service to the nation and church."

This paper investigates issues related to measuring religious mission effectiveness in Catholic schools in the United States. The overarching question is: Do Catholic schools make a difference? To answer this question, the paper addresses these related questions: What does previous research tell us? What are the challenges we face? What are some schools or school networks doing to meet the challenges? What is the value of measuring religious mission? What are our recommendations for moving forward?

2. Previous Research

Prior research has focused primarily on religious outcomes, namely knowledge, practice, and beliefs. Several major studies have been conducted over the years to determine if Catholic schools have a positive effect on religious literacy, behavior, and attitudes. Early research conducted from the mid-1960s through the 1980s, especially those completed by Greeley and associates, found a significant positive correlation between Catholic schooling and religiosity (Greeley & Rossi, 1966; Greeley, McCready, & McCourt, 1976; Fee, Greeley, McCready, & Sullivan, 1981; Benson, Yeager, Wood, Guerra, & Manno, 1986; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Guerra, Donahue, & Benson, 1990). According to Convey (1992), “the influence of Catholic schools on religious practice of adolescents and adults progressively increased from the 1960s to the 1980s, a period during which a general decline occurred in the regular Mass attendance, not only of Catholic school students, but of the general Catholic population as well” (p. 71).

Later research is less consistent in terms of demonstrating the positive effects of Catholic schooling. Some studies show few or small effects (D’Antonio, Davidson, Hoge, & Wallace, 1989, 1996; Davidson et al., 1997). Using the Assessment of Catholic Religious Education (ACRE) as the measure, Convey and Thompson (1999) found that Catholic school attendance impacts religious knowledge from middle school through high school but influences religious practice only at the 5th and 6th grade level. Most recently, in a study conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), researchers concluded that attending a Catholic high school positively influences Mass attendance and greatly reduces the likelihood that a person will convert to another religion or disaffiliate from organized religion altogether (Perl & Gray, 2006). In reference to the evolution of the difference that Catholic schools make, the authors offer this proposition:

Perhaps in recent decades the relationship between Catholic schooling and adult Catholic commitment has become less direct. Instead of directly bolstering religious practices and beliefs, Catholic schooling may be reducing the likelihood that Catholics leave the Church entirely (p. 26).

Although any positive effect is welcome news, it seems to us that reducing Catholic school impact to the point of influencing a person’s decision to stay in or leave the Catholic Church represents a considerable lowering of the bar.

In our opinion, the biggest concern is not that recent research results are underwhelming in support of the Catholic school effect on religious outcomes. Instead, we are alarmed by the small amount of research being done despite recommendations to step up research in this area. In the concluding chapter of *Catholic Schools Make a Difference: Twenty-Five Years of Research*, Convey (1992) singled out the comprehensive study of religious outcomes of Catholic schools as one of two national research priorities for the future. Convey urges, “Because the commitment to the religious formation of students is so essential to the very nature of Catholic schools, monitoring the effectiveness of the schools in this regard should receive the highest priority” (p. 185). Ten years later, in *Catholic Schools Still Make a Difference*, Meegan, Carroll, and Ciriello (2002) report, “Little research regarding religious outcomes of Catholic schools has been done in the past decade” (p. 53). They stress, “The absence of ongoing and current research regarding religious outcomes of Catholic schools is a serious concern.” Five years later, in 2007, it still appears that very little research has been done in this area in the United States.

Therefore, the question still remains, do Catholic schools make a difference and how do we know? It is easy to see that much more research needs to be done nationally and locally to answer this question by measuring the effectiveness of the religious mission of Catholic schools. Like Convey (1992), we believe that, in addition to national research, each school should conduct some version of institutional research to monitor its own effectiveness. As Convey notes, oftentimes this can be accomplished in conjunction with re-accreditation or school improvement processes.

3. Challenges of Institutional Research

There are a number of inherent challenges connected to the issue and work of measuring religious mission effectiveness, particularly at the school level. It is important to identify reasons that may explain causes for inaction or resistance.

Awareness – Creating an awareness of the importance of this work in Catholic schools is critical and often a challenge. Some are simply unaware of the need to assess religious mission effectiveness. They are satisfied with the attitude, “You know it when you see it.” Convincing people that improvements need to be made based on research recommendations and our reality is also a challenge.

Pandora’s Box – Some do not want to call attention to issues of Catholic identity in the hopes of flying under the radar. Others are afraid to ask questions related to religious mission effectiveness for fear of what the results might be, let alone what the

implications of those results might be. In their opinion, it is better to leave well enough alone. They prefer a “don’t ask, don’t tell” approach.

Priorities – Are we giving more to Caesar than to God? With increasing demands from the government and accrediting agencies related to educational assessment and school improvement, it is easy to see how the religious dimension of a school could take a back seat or get left behind altogether. Creating a culture in which the religious mission becomes the focal point of all school activity and the school’s entire “way of life” must be done with intention (Cook, 2001). It does not occur by osmosis or happenstance. Engaging stakeholders in the process of identifying, articulating, implementing, and assessing the mission demands energy and time, and therefore, requires priority status.

Measurement Difficulties - Many school communities struggle with concretely defining what is being measured in terms of religious mission and identifying the best ways to do so. What is meant by such nebulous and potentially ambiguous terms as “mission”, “spirituality”, “Catholicity”? These characteristics are harder to measure than academic outcomes. Does the academic framework fit? Are we imposing something that does not fit? What data will best measure a school’s efforts in promoting these attributes? Who should be involved in this process? Students? Faculty? Staff? Parents? Alumni? Answers to these questions are essential from the onset, and they provide the foundation and framework for any study of mission effectiveness.

Leadership Wherewithal - The responsibility of measuring mission effectiveness most often falls on the head administrator who may lack the training and expertise in data collection and analysis, and who certainly lacks the time to devote to these practices. The tasks of developing appropriate assessment instruments, gathering and disaggregating data, analyzing results, drawing appropriate conclusions, and implementing changes may be well beyond the scope of the head administrator’s capabilities. The time required for these endeavors may become overwhelming and thus might serve to frustrate the entire process.

Lack of Resources - Few resources are available to assist administrators in measuring religious mission effectiveness. This lack of resources gives leaders the sense that they are feeling their way through the dark. Although some assessment instruments have been developed, administrators may actually be aware of very few. Hiring additional, qualified personnel to assist in this responsibility may be helpful. However, for most Catholic schools, financial resources are limited and finding funding sources for assessment tools, data analysis, or personnel may not always be possible.

4. Meeting the Challenges

4.1 Instruments

For those schools beginning to meet the challenges in measuring religious mission effectiveness, resources developed by the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) such as Assessment of Catechesis / Religious Education (ACRE), *Validating the Vision*, and *Continuing the Tradition* may provide some assistance.

ACRE is an assessment instrument designed by NCEA to assist schools and parishes in specifically evaluating religious education programs. Administered in grades 5, 8 or 9, and 12, ACRE is divided into four sections measuring faith knowledge, personal beliefs and attitudes, personal practices, and perceptions of school, parish, and self. A summary report informs administrators of the extent to which the tenets of the Catholic faith are being taught and learned and provides a compilation of student responses regarding Catholic beliefs, behaviors, perceptions, and practices.

ACRE has been endorsed by many as a valuable assessment tool. At Dowling Catholic High School in Des Moines, Iowa, ACRE is administered to students when they enter as freshmen and, again, prior to graduation. President Jerry Deegan believes the instrument is a good quantitative measure and helps to direct their religious education program. “We have used ACRE to help focus our curriculum and fill in the blanks if we have something missing” (J. Deegan, personal communication, February 2, 2007).

Validating the Vision goes beyond the scope of ACRE and provides Catholic high schools with an assessment protocol for mission effectiveness, institutional accreditation, and strategic planning. Based on the premise that Catholic identity is embedded in all aspects of the school, *Validating the Vision* provides a model for the evaluation of foundation documents and the overall state of the school, as well as strategies and action plans for future planning. *Validating the Vision* has been approved by a number of regional accrediting agencies in the United States.

Continuing the Tradition: A Catholic Elementary/Middle School Improvement Process is specifically designed for Catholic elementary and middle schools, and it closely follows the school improvement process developed by the U.S. Department of Education for its Blue Ribbon School Program. This institutional protocol outlines a step-by-step process for Catholic school assessment that integrates Catholic character, focuses on self-assessment, and includes a suggested timeline for action plans and implementation strategies.

4.2 School Network Examples

On a more localized level, individual schools within a religious network have found some direction and resources in measuring mission effectiveness from their network leaders. For one, the Jesuit Secondary Education Association (JSEA) provides the schools in its network an assessment instrument intended to measure student growth in five categories articulated in their graduate profile: open to growth, intellectually competent, loving, religious, and committed to doing justice. This Student Profile Survey (SPS), administered to incoming freshmen and graduating seniors, is scored by the JSEA and a follow-up report is then generated for the school. The report summarizes student growth for the individual school and also draws a comparison with other students within the Jesuit network who have participated in the survey. John Naatz, principal of Creighton Preparatory School in Omaha, Nebraska, whose mission is to, “form men of faith, scholarship, leadership, and service in the Catholic and Jesuit tradition”, has utilized this instrument with some positive results. According to Naatz, although only about half of the 49 Jesuit schools in the U.S. use the SPS, a few curriculum and program changes have been implemented at Prep based on these survey results (J. Naatz, personal communication, February 16, 2007).

Affiliated with the Sisters of Mercy network, Mercy High School in Omaha, Nebraska, “ministers to young women as they learn to express their faithfulness to the ideals of Jesus through faith, knowledge and compassionate service.” This religious dimension of the school is directly tied to the graduation standards which are, in turn, directly tied to all department and course standards. The Mercy Network of Secondary Education provides a set of core values that define a school as a “Mercy” school, and it is these core values upon which the local school’s graduation standards are based and measured. Currently, the Mercy network is developing an assessment instrument that schools can utilize to measure “Mercy mission effectiveness,” which is scheduled for completion for the 2008-2009 school year. In the meantime, Mercy High School has, in recent years, implemented independent assessment strategies focusing directly on “Catholicity” and “Mercy mission effectiveness”. The data collection process includes surveys, interviews, and NCEA’s ACRE. According to school principal, Carolyn Jaworski, “The benefit of this data collection is the affirmation that the mission of the school is being carried out effectively” (C. Jaworski, personal communication, February 11, 2007).

Similarly, the Marianist network has provided some support and direction to schools within its network to gauge mission effectiveness. In 1996, the Marianist community articulated the common elements of the Marianist educational philosophy and spirit defined as the “Characteristics of a Marianist Education”. They are to:

- ◆ Educate for formation in faith
- ◆ Provide an integral, quality education
- ◆ Educate in family spirit
- ◆ Educate for service, justice, and peace
- ◆ Educate for adaptation and change

In order to ensure that these characteristics are communicated and implemented in Marianist-sponsored schools, each school is asked by the network to form a Local Implementation Team to work with members of the school community in developing programs for the daily living of the characteristics. The network has provided schools with descriptors and practices for each of the characteristics, and survey instruments for their students and personnel that can be utilized for data collection. In addition, the Marianist community provides for a “Mission Effectiveness Team” to annually visit schools in its network. The intent of this team is to affirm the work of each Marianist school, to focus the mission of each school for members of the school community, and to encourage the school community to fulfill their mission.”

At Daniel J. Gross Catholic High School, a Marianist-sponsored school in Omaha, Nebraska that is “committed to developing Christian leaders through educational excellence in the Marianist tradition,” recent efforts have been made to implement a mission effectiveness program. There, a Local Implementation Team meets regularly to review school programs and the religion curriculum, and to provide suggestions and strategies to more effectively integrate the Marianist mission. Recommendations and commendations made by the Mission Effectiveness Team during annual visits are shared with the entire faculty and staff and provide direction for improvements in school-wide programs. Faculty members are held accountable for their participation in promoting the characteristics of Marianist education as part of their staff evaluation. At this point, the efforts at Gross Catholic have primarily focused on continued staff development and the integration of the Marianist characteristics across the school curriculum. The next step for this school is to develop strategies for effectively and consistently measuring mission effectiveness through a specifically outlined data collection and analysis process.

5. Appreciating the Value

Even though there are challenges associated with measuring religious mission, the dividends far exceed the drawbacks. For many reasons, measuring mission is simply the right thing to do. For one thing, families, Church leaders, and other school stakeholders have a right to truth in advertising. We have an obligation to be who we say we are and to provide evidence to back up our claims. Furthermore, how can we make a case for costly investment by Church leaders, benefactors, parents, and other stakeholders when we do not have evidence that we make a difference in the faith life of students and graduates?

Logic and research suggest that proving and communicating effectiveness in the religious dimension should result in increased support for Catholic schools. One new national study reveals that Catholic school leaders underestimate the importance of a school's religious dimension in the eyes of families and shows that quality religious education is the number one reason parents give for enrolling their children in Catholic elementary schools (CARA, 2006). These findings reinforce the value of stepping up our efforts to assess, strengthen, and ultimately communicate our effectiveness in the religious domain. Assessing our Catholic identity keeps us faithful to mission *and* it is good for business.

Provided below is a sample list of reasons why assessing our apostolic mission effectiveness is a valuable thing to do.

Measuring religious mission effectiveness:

- Ensures accountability.
- Facilitates truth in advertising.
- Instills confidence in families, Church leaders, and other stakeholders.
- Builds a case for bolstering the Catholic community's investment in Catholic school education.
- Affirms current school efforts.
- Encourages continuous school improvement.
- Opens communication and dialogue.
- Shares responsibility and creates ownership.
- Provides focus and direction and clarifies goals.
- Strengthens the school.

6. Recommendations

Enlightened by previous research findings, recognizing inherent challenges, buoyed by what some schools are doing to meet the challenges, and believing that measuring religious mission effectiveness is valuable, we offer these recommendations for moving forward.

Make religious mission effectiveness a priority. If Catholic schools are to be authentic, accountable, and irreplaceable, then assessing apostolic mission effectiveness must become a priority among priorities. Let us ensure that we respond to the urgings of God as much as or more than we respond to the demands of Caesar.

Conduct more research. A review of the literature reveals a lacuna of recent research related to measuring the religious mission effectiveness of Catholic schools. More research needs to be done at the national, network, diocesan, and institutional level. It would be particularly helpful to identify the characteristics and practices of schools that are effective in the religious dimension. Furthermore, instead of fearing potential negative research findings, we should consider these findings a road map for school improvement and mission actualization.

Conceptualize religious mission in terms of graduate outcomes. Over the years we have seen our thinking about education evolve from an emphasis on teacher inputs to one on student outputs (Johnson, Musial, Hall, Gollnick, & Dupuis, 2005). In like fashion, Catholic educators should conceptualize religious mission in terms of student and graduate outcomes because it is the truest measure of school effectiveness. In reference to Jesuit higher education, Rev. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., Superior General of the Society of Jesus, affirms, “The real measure of our Jesuit universities lies in who our students become” (Kolvenbach, 2000).

Think in terms of evidence. Where Catholic identity or effectiveness of religious mission is concerned, Catholic schools can no longer be satisfied with responses like “you know it when you see it” or “it’s something you feel.” The principles of accountability and assessment require evidence. In identifying and collecting evidence, however, we should interpret the term “evidence” broadly and longitudinally. What constitutes evidence (or data)? Data can be norm-referenced or criterion-referenced. Evidence can be quantitative statistics and qualitative stories. No one measure will provide the complete picture. Furthermore, since the religious effects of Catholic schooling continue to unfold long after students graduate, results will not always be immediate or apparent on the day of graduation. Therefore, we need to take the long view with regards to

mission effectiveness. Finally, we should identify evidence that is tailored to fit the customized mission of each school.

Create school mission effectiveness structures and processes. Schools and networks of schools must create the infrastructure that will facilitate assessment of a school's effectiveness in the religious domain. Structures and processes that exemplify this recommendation include a mission effectiveness committee, vice president for mission effectiveness, director of institutional research, mission effectiveness self-study, and a periodic mission review by an external team.

Do not reinvent the wheel. As this paper demonstrates, some instruments and processes related to measuring religious mission effectiveness already exist. We encourage school leaders to investigate and adapt available instruments and current best practices. Many schools are still not taking advantage of what is available to them. For instance, only 33% of Catholic schools in the United States use the ACRE assessment tool for religious education (D. Raiche, personal communication, February 26, 2007).

7. Conclusion

Church documents related to Catholic education refer to Catholic schools as "educational project[s]" (CCE, 1997, # 4). This characterization bespeaks the notion of Catholic schools being works in progress that are need of renewal. "It must never be forgotten that the school itself is always in the process of being created ..." (CCE, 1982, #78). In this age of accountability, monitoring religious mission effectiveness needs to be ongoing. Prior research affirms Catholic school effectiveness in the religious domain, but the evidence is underwhelming. Clearly, more needs to be done. Although there are challenges inherent in measuring religious mission, the value of doing so outweighs the challenges. Some schools and networks are attempting to meet these challenges. If Catholic schools are to be faithful to their mission and demonstrate to stakeholders that they do make a difference in the faith life of students and graduates, we recommend that schools and networks place a priority on collecting evidence to measure religious mission effectiveness.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How do you know your school is effective in terms of religious mission?
2. Based on your school's unique mission and graduate outcomes, what is appropriate evidence?
3. What evidence and/or data are you already collecting?
4. What actions are you taking to improve your school's effectiveness in the religious dimension?

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