

Partnership COALITIONS

A Response to Crisis in Catholic Education | Bill Gartside |

The start of a new school year brings with it excitement and anticipation for Catholic school principals as they greet their students and teachers who are returning from the summer vacation. However, for many, there is heightened anxiety and worry. For far too many, this will be their school's final year.

While many Catholic schools continue to close, support for Catholic education is experiencing a renaissance across the country. Coalitions are forming to respond to the crisis in Catholic education. Foundations, corporations, universities and individual donors who understand the critical nature of Catholic education are establishing partnerships to introduce new paradigms for governance and finance. It is clear that the traditional parochial structures in many areas of the country can no longer support Catholic schools. It is encouraging that new initiatives to save Catholic schools, particularly urban Catholic schools, are experiencing success. Six inner-city Catholic schools in New York City, Partnership Schools, share a new management structure governed by local school boards instead of the parishes. Similar partnerships have taken root in Philadelphia, where Independence Mission Schools is a coalition of 15 inner-city Catholic elementary schools. Catholic Partnership Schools in Camden, New Jersey combined five schools. The Messmer Schools in Milwaukee, serving 1,600 children, linked two failing elementary schools to a thriving Catholic high school. In Boston,

seven Catholic elementary schools were merged into one regional school, John Paul II Academy.

For the first 90 years of its existence, Saint Columbkille School was the heart of the working class Irish and Italian Brighton section of Boston. It closed its high school in the 1990s and saw decreasing enrollment into the new century. In December of 2006, the pastor met with the principal and told her that the school would be closing after the Christmas vacation. The parish did not have the funds to pay the salaries of the dedicated teaching staff. Enrollment had slipped to below 150, with most families requiring financial assistance. At the end of the previous year, another school in Brighton had closed, and in neighboring Allston, another Catholic school was teetering. The prospect of having no Catholic school in this neighborhood was very real. This was unacceptable to William Leahy, SJ, the president of Boston College, which sits just a mile away.

Saint Columbkille Partnership School is now thriving as a result of a partnership agreement between the archdiocese, the parish and Boston College. With a substantial financial investment by the University, and grants from foundations and individuals, the building has been renovated, adding science labs, art and music rooms, a new dining hall and an athletic field. Teachers earn their masters' degree from Boston College free of charge in exchange for three years of post-degree service. The Lynch School of Education at Boston College provides educational expertise to guide the school in selecting and implementing data-driven and research-based curriculum. With Boston College as managing partner, a transformation has taken place. Saint



Columbkille Partnership School now enrolls more than 420 students.

Saint Columbkille has professionalized itself in every way, creating systems for enrollment management, financial planning, family engagement, academic coaching, technology integration, student support and fund-raising.

Father Leahy further envisioned high-quality Catholic education in Brighton, from Pre-K through university. This is possible due to Boston College's commitment to Saint Columbkille Partnership School and neighboring Saint Joseph Preparatory High School. In both of these schools "Catholic" is the guiding value. Saint Columbkille Partnership School sees evangelization as one of its primary charges. Every year, the school community gathers to witness and welcome newly baptized students. A pipeline filled with students who have been formed with Catholic values, and who are well-prepared for the rigors of high school and higher education, is quickly developing.

This partnership agreement has been a win-win-win for all three partners. Saint Columbkille Partnership School has become a repository of best practices

that the archdiocese can draw upon to assist other schools. Saint Columbkille Partnership School is an anchor in the community, adding a measure of stability to the parish. The Lynch School of Education at Boston College, and the university as a whole, have been enriched by the partnership. Saint Columbkille has become a preferred school for teacher training, educational research and volunteerism.

The success of Saint Columbkille Partnership School is evidence that Catholic education, when it is re-envisioned and supported by others who understand its importance, can not only survive, but also flourish. Saint Columbkille Partnership School is grateful to Boston College, which had the courage to lead and form the partnership with the Archdiocese of Boston and Saint Columbkille parish. Every child deserves a high-quality Catholic education. The partnership has made it possible.

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