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The Charism of 21st-Century Catholic Schools: Building a Culture of Relationships

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Catholic schools are called to embody an identity and charism that make a unique and meaningful contribution to our Church and society. In the article, the authors present a coherent and relevant framework for thinking about Catholic identity and charism in contemporary schools using relationships as the organizing principle. The authors assert that 21st-century Catholic schools can provide a much needed and appealing charism for today's world by building a culture of relationships. The authors' framework deals specifically with a student's relationship with self, God, others, the local and world community, and creation, as well as a student's ability to critique culture through the lens of faith. The framework draws on ecclesial documents, scholarship, and current educational practice.

"Let us lay our charism of education at the Lord's feet and enable him to teach us how to read the signs of the times" (D'Souza, 1998, p. 48).

What is the charism of Catholic school education today? What is its distinctive purpose and unique gift to the Church and society? Catholic school leaders and scholars must address these questions if we want Catholic schools to remain relevant and a worthy investment in today's competitive educational arena where choices are increasing but financial resources are not. Close to half of the Catholic schools that were open in 1960 have since been closed (United States Department of Education, 2008). Archbishop Timothy Dolan (2010) asks, "But what of today's Catholic schools? Are we not facing [a] crisis of closure for the Catholic school in America?" (para. 3). He answers:

Statistics from the National Catholic Educational Association tell a sobering tale about Catholic schools in the United States. From a student enrollment in the mid-1960s of more than 5.2 million in nearly 13,000 elementary and secondary Catholic schools across America, there are now only half as many, with just 7,000 schools and 2.1 million students enrolled. (para. 4)

There are a number of means Catholic educators can use to secure strong Catholic schools for the future; and one strategy is for each school to develop a distinctive identity that will set it apart from all other schools. Modern Church documents are instructive with regards to the distinctive aims and characteristics of Catholic education. For example, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* describes the Catholic school “as a place of integral education of the human person through a clear educational project of which Christ is the foundation” (Congregation for Catholic Education [CCE], 1998, n. 4). The school’s task “is fundamentally a synthesis of culture and faith, and a synthesis of faith and life” (CCE, 1977, n. 37). The U.S. bishops affirm four purposes for Catholic schools: “to provide an atmosphere in which the Gospel message is proclaimed, community in Christ is experienced, service to our sisters and brothers is the norm, and thanksgiving and worship of God is cultivated” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 2005, p. 1). Although there are common themes in various Church documents, such as dignity of the human person, faith community, and integration of faith and learning, it is our opinion that the documents lack an organizing principle or thread that captures the essence of Catholic school education in a manageable and memorable way.

Scholars have also attempted to capture the essence of Catholic education. In *Educating for Life* Groome (1998) proposes eight characteristics of Catholic Christianity that he believes informs the educational philosophy and spiritual vision of Catholic education. These faith-based characteristics are: a positive view of humanity, the belief that everywhere is God and everything is sacred (“sacramental consciousness”), an emphasis on relationship and community, a commitment to history and tradition, an appreciation for reason and a desire for truth, the belief that humans are spiritual beings, a conviction for justice, and a dedication to inclusive hospitality and global solidarity. Although Groome’s configuration of attributes share common elements with those put forth by Church documents on Catholic education, Groome does not reference the documents or draw a connection to them.

Religious order schools and networks often draw on the charism of their founding religious congregations to sharpen their focus and clarify their distinctive educational vision and qualities. A charism is a gift given by the Holy Spirit to a person or group for a particular work in the world (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994, n. 799). Catholic schools sponsored by the Franciscans distinguish themselves by living out the charisms of Saint Francis. According

to Govert (2010), “[t]he Franciscan charism includes the following dimensions: recognition of the primacy of Christ, reverence for all creation, respect for the dignity of the human person, community, peace-making, service, compassion, poverty, and simplicity” (p. 60). By contrast, Catholic schools sponsored by the Dominicans draw their inspiration from the lives of Saint Dominic and Saint Thomas Aquinas. The Dominican charism consists of four pillars: study, prayer, community, and service (Hagstrom, 2010). Although there are similarities between Dominican and Franciscan Catholic schools, each type of school has its own unique charism that results in a flavored Catholic education in emphasis and approach.

To be successful in a competitive market, Catholic schools must offer a unique educational opportunity in order to attract students and remain viable. Church documents provide inspiration and guidance, but they do not provide a framework that is consistent throughout the documents and easy for practitioners to apply. Groome offers a list of Catholic school commitments and characteristics, but these do not have an overarching theme. Religious order school charisms only apply to schools associated with that religious order. However, we like the way religious order schools conceptualize their identity in terms of charism because charism has an outward orientation. In other words, charism adds to school identity the dimension of school giftedness and contribution to Church and society. Because of their religious nature, all Catholic schools, not just religious orders schools, can and should claim a charism to educate in a special way that benefits the contemporary Church and society (CCE, 1977, 1982; Cook, 2004, 2008, 2010; Simonds, 2007; Vatican Council II, 1965/1996b).

The purpose of this article is to present a framework that offers a coherent and relevant way of looking at Catholic identity and charism in contemporary schools. This framework uses relationships as the single organizing principle. Relationship building meets a societal need and relationships are a thread that can be found in ecclesial documents, congregational charisms, and scholarly writing related to Catholic schools. This framework brings relationship building into focus, highlights it, and names it as an appealing 21st-century charism for Catholic schools that are in need of one.

Inspiration for the Framework

In discerning the distinctive way education should occur in Catholic schools, it is essential to consider the 21st-century context in which Catholic schools exist (Cook, 2001, 2004, 2008, 2010; Dolan, 2010). The 21st century finds us both

drawn together and driven apart. Wheatley (2002), a well-known organizational expert, suggests that a focus on relationships will help us find a balance in these turbulent times. Wheatley writes, "Relationships are all there is. Everything in the universe only exists because it is in relationship to everything else. Nothing exists in isolation" (p. 19).

Although relationships are recognized as the glue that holds people together in every school (Sergiovanni & Starrat, 2007; Slater, 2004; Wolk, 2003), Catholic schools have a unique religious charism that provides a purifying and balancing of human relationships (Simonds, 2007). Building on their strength as uniquely religious educational institutions, Catholic schools should set a new course for the future by making relationship building the distinctive purpose of all their school programs.

One need not look any further than our foundational belief in the trinity to grasp the centrality of relationship in Christian theology. Scripture tells us that our God is a God of relationships in his very being. The three persons are not only intimately related to one another as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; they are one and the same. They are triune—three persons in one God: God the creator, God the redeemer, and God the sanctifier (Mark 16:14-18; Matthew 28:16-20). Scripture makes clear that all Christianity is about relationship. Jesus' teaching captures the essence of this relational mandate: "Love God above all else; Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:28-31).

Scholars underscore the centrality of relationships in Catholic self-understanding (Donovan, 1997; Groome, 1996, 1998, 2002; McBrien, 1994). Catholic core values outlined by McBrien (1994) describe this notion of relationship as follows:

- Sacramentality—We experience God in and through all things.
- Mediation—We come to God through Jesus.
- Communion—We can only live the Gospel in community.
- Tradition—We are one with our cumulative and collective past.

This set of core values makes Catholicism unique and clarifies that relationships are a unifying theme of Catholic Christianity.

Catholic Church documents clearly indicate the primary importance of relationships in Catholic schools. For example, the bishops gathered at Vatican Council II (1965/1996b) wrote, "Between pupils of different talents and backgrounds [the Catholic school] promotes friendly relations and fosters a spirit of mutual understanding" (n. 5). In *To Teach as Jesus Did*, the U.S. bishops

wrote that “community is at the heart of Christian education” (USCCB, 1972, n. 23). Moreover, the bishops stated that one of the aims of Catholic schools is to form “persons-in-community” (n. 13).

Just before the millennium, the CCE (1998) described how relationships must be the foundation of the educational process in Catholic schools:

During childhood and adolescence a student needs to experience personal relations with outstanding educators, and what is taught has greater influence on the student’s formation when placed in a context of personal involvement, genuine reciprocity, coherence of attitudes, lifestyles and day-to-day behavior. (n. 18)

Most recently, the CCE (2007) emphasized that relationships in a Catholic school bring people together in communion with one another. The Catholic school is a place where adults and young people can come together and explore life in a unique setting that embraces the spiritual part of reality as a way to understand fully the human situation in the world.

Relationships are at the heart of what it means to be a Catholic school. Each human being is called to be in a loving relationship with self, God, and others and is encouraged to see the interconnectedness of all creation. It is this view of the human person elucidated in Scripture and Church teaching that inspires our relationship building framework for Catholic schools. Catholic schools are places of relationship-building, and it is out of these life-giving relationships that the mission priorities of the school emerge. A school is authentically and distinctively Catholic when it fosters relationships that are both human and divine. Catholic educators who embrace the concept of relationship building as the organizing principle for their schools will embark on a process of educational change. The focus of this change process will be the graduates of the schools. How can students in Catholic schools become people who seek to build relationships?

Constructing the Framework

Taking our inspiration from Scripture, ecclesial documents, and Church scholars, we have constructed a framework to help stakeholders in Catholic schools review and renew the purpose of their schools. The framework provides a new way to look at Catholic schools and can be used as a means to revitalize schools by building a culture of relationships (see Figure 1).

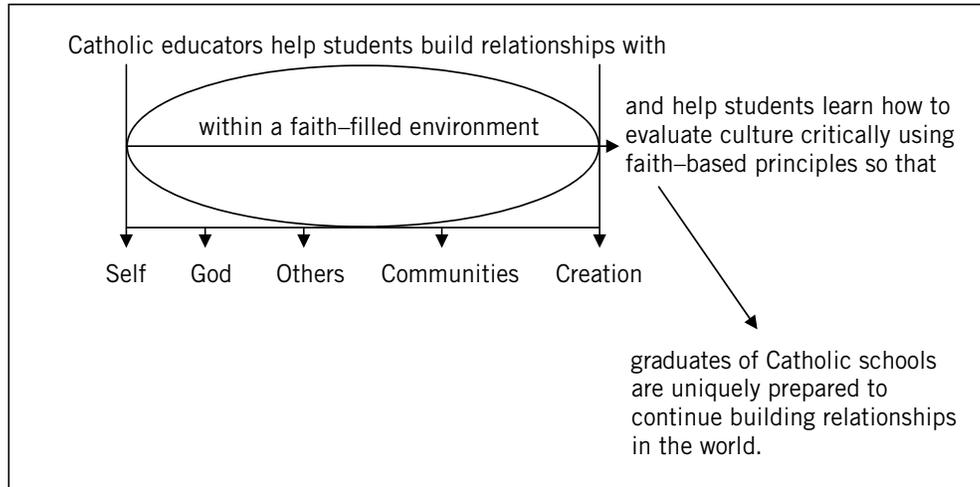


Figure 1. A framework for the renewal of Catholic schools.

This framework has been constructed out of important insights scattered throughout Church documents on Catholic education. This new model calls Catholic schools to help students build relationships with self, God, others, the local and world community, and creation. At the same time, Catholic schools are also called to help students understand the relationship between culture and faith. The framework challenges Catholic schools to ask whether their mission is truly lived out in the lives of their graduates.

To become these places where lives are changed, human relationships must be the keystone to constructing Catholic schools with living and vibrant educational environments. The role of the teacher is pivotal in setting the tone in both the school and the classroom (CCE, 1998; USCCB, 1972). In order to implement this framework in a Catholic school, therefore, the adult educators in the school must engage in a process of spiritual formation through which they come to understand the unique purpose and methods of Catholic education (Simonds, 2007; USCCB, 1995).

In the following sections of this paper, we will briefly describe each aspect of this new framework in order to help educators and scholars use this framework to renew schools. As we explore the varied aspects of this framework, keep in mind Catholic schools as they exist today. Are there some areas of growth? Are there things to celebrate? What changes could be made to curriculum, faculty development programs, instruction, policies, or

rituals to strengthen the formation of relationships in the schools?

A Relationship with Self

For a person to be in healthy relationship with others, a person must know and like him- or herself. Therefore, our model begins with a process of self-exploration. One of the aims of the Catholic school is to provide an environment of security and opportunity where students feel safe to discover their unique personhood (CCE, 2007). Though each is made in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27), each possesses different needs, talents, and gifts. The Catholic school strives to draw out these gifts and help students learn how to place their gifts in the service of God and their neighbor. Experiencing success and enjoying affirmation will help build confidence, self-esteem, self-worth, and self-respect. Metaphorically speaking, the whole process is akin to a flower blooming or a caterpillar becoming a butterfly.

This transformation or metamorphosis occurs vis-à-vis an education that emphasizes growth and formation of the whole person (Simonds, 2006). The aim of Catholic education is to help students become fully alive in their mind, heart, body, and spirit (CCE, 1977, 2002). The education in a Catholic school does not focus on any one dimension of the self, but rather strives to bring the whole self into relationship with God. Education in a Catholic school is a liberating experience, helping students move beyond fear and difficulties to see themselves as gifts to be shared with others (CCE, 1977; Wicks, 2003). Catholic educators play an important role in this process, helping each student begin a journey of discovery (CCE, 1988, 1998, 2002; John Paul II, 1979; Simonds, 2006).

A Relationship with God

As students continue to develop their self-understanding, the Catholic educator helps them to grow in their knowledge and experience of God. This faith-filled education is only possible in private schools, and Catholic schools believe that religious formation is central to their identity as schools (CCE, 1988). In the Catholic school, the search for meaning is largely spiritual in nature and is based upon the core belief that humans have a "divine origin" and an "eternal destiny" (CCE, 1988, n. 56). To explore life fully with all its questions and complexities, a "complete education necessarily includes a religious dimension" (CCE, 1977, n. 19).

In the Catholic school, the discovery of who God is necessarily includes

learning about Christ (John Paul II, 1979; Vatican Council II, 1965/1996b). The Catholic school “transforms a person of virtue into a person of Christ” (CCE, 1977, n. 47). At the same time, Catholic educators must help students to learn about other religions (USCCB, 1972; Vatican Council II, 1965/1996b; Weber, 2010).

The tension between proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus and learning about other religions can create a dynamic process that deepens learning and enhances relationship building (Vatican Council II, 1965/1996a). This tension between Christianity and other religions can also lead to breaks in relationships. In our present context in which people find it difficult to live with the tension of differences (Weber, 2010), Catholic schools can help their graduates to be persons who build relationships with all people. Deep reflection on practice and the purpose of Catholic schools will be required for educators to achieve the goal of graduating students who seek to build relationships rather than fences. Jesus’ style of embracing people and listening to them could be used as a model to facilitate this process (Vatican Council II, 1965/1996a).

A Relationship with Others

Being able to reach out and embrace other people different from the self is an important skill for relationship building; however, students often need help from their teachers to develop this skill (CCE, 1998; Vatican Council II, 1965/1996b). The CCE (1998) indicates that there must be a special emphasis on the teacher–student relationship. Teachers play a key role in helping students learn how to develop relationships with self, God, and others. The individual care for each student that epitomizes Catholic education is the foundation for good teaching. The student will reach higher when he or she feels that the teacher genuinely cares and is calling the student to reach out to others and make a difference in the world (Lowney, 2009). Jacobs (1996) has described this care for students in Catholic schools, calling the encounter between the teacher and the student “an intimate communication between souls” (p. 37).

The support and encouragement of teachers enables students to live their faith and share it with others (USCCB, 1972). Students can then model relational living for their peers and become positive leaders in the schools (CCE, 1998; USCCB, 1976). These student leaders can enhance the efforts of adult educators in the schools by taking responsibility to help build a culture of life-giving relationships in the schools (Simonds, 2009b). As students buy into this

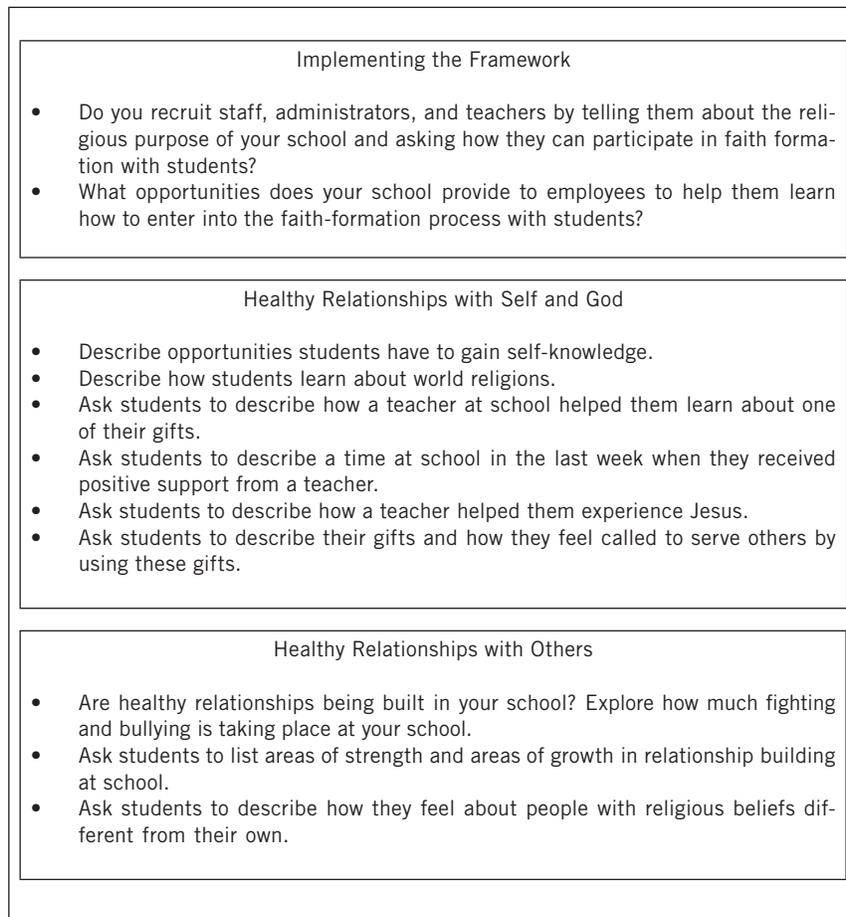


Figure 2. Application of the framework to Catholic schools.

positive culture of relationship building, endemic issues that destroy relationships, such as student-on-student bullying, can be addressed by both teachers and students (Simonds, 2009b, 2009c). Figure 2 provides some bullet points to help educators and scholars consider how Catholic schools can become these places where students are transformed with the help of their teachers.

A Relationship with the Local and World Community

As students and teachers strive to develop a culture of relationships within the Catholic school, they must also look beyond the school campus. In both the local community and the larger world community there are myriad opportuni-

ties for developing relationships with other people.

Through service opportunities, the integration of current events in the curriculum, and opportunities to learn about world cultures and religions, Catholic educators can prepare students to become citizens of the world (CCE, 1977, 1988, 1998). Service opportunities must be carefully developed so that students learn from the persons they meet and develop relationships with them (CCE, 2007). It is also important that the Christian service done is differentiated from good acts done for purely secular reasons (Benedict XVI, 2009). The goal of a Catholic school is to graduate young people who will serve God and make a difference in the world (CCE, 1998; USCCB, 1972; Vatican Council II, 1965/1996b). Service opportunities that help students learn the religious motivations for service can be a very effective means to this end.

A Relationship with Creation

In addition to helping students grow in their awareness of the world beyond the school, Catholic educators must also integrate environmental consciousness within school curricula and programs (Benedict XVI, 2009; Simonds, 2009a). God created human beings in His image and likeness and put them on earth “to cultivate and care for it” (Genesis 2:15). In *Stewardship: A Disciple’s Response*, the U.S. bishops (USCCB, 1993) likewise noted that we are called to care for all of God’s creation.

The Catholic Church is raising its voice to alert us to the fact that failing to care for the created world is leading us in a dangerous direction (Benedict XVI, 2009). Catholic schools must consider how they can integrate faith principles across the curriculum to help students understand these complex realities. Concerns about our environment and how businesses, corporations, governments, and peoples impact the environment in both good and bad ways need to be integrated into the curriculum within Catholic schools (Simonds, 2009a). Through the modeling of environmentally friendly practices, green architecture, and the integration of green energy initiatives in schools, Catholic educators, students, and parents can put their faith into action. With all green initiatives, it will be critically important that educators differentiate between action done for spiritual reasons and action done for purely secular reasons (Benedict XVI, 2009). Each opportunity for service and action can be an opportunity to deepen religious learning and build relationships.

Completing the Framework: The Synthesis of Culture and Faith

An important lesson that Catholic educators can share with students is the need to be discerning in the way they develop relationships and understand the world around them (Benedict XVI, 2009; CCE, 1998; USCCB, 1972; Vatican Council II, 1965/1996b). Students need to learn how to become discerning thinkers who use faith-based values to analyze culture critically.

The CCE (1998) wrote, “From the nature of the Catholic school also stems one of the most significant elements of its educational project: the synthesis between culture and faith” (n. 14). The nature of the Catholic school is to be a place where God meets young people and helps them to understand themselves and their world fully. This fuller understanding of the self and the world requires that students learn to be critical thinkers who can discern what is good and what is evil; what is true and what is false; what is beautiful and what is not.

The U.S. bishops spoke about the synthesis of culture and faith, declaring that “Th[e] integration of religious truth and values with life distinguishes the Catholic school from other schools” (USCCB, 1972, n. 105). This approach, said the bishops, is countercultural because the tendency in modern society is to compartmentalize learning and life, and separate it from faith.

To help students consider how a synthesis between culture and faith is possible, educators must help students to understand both culture and faith, and then help students to see culture through the lens of faith. The Gospel of Jesus must be used as a principle to evaluate culture critically and to bring together with faith those aspects of culture that are in harmony with the Gospel (Benedict XVI, 2009; Dolan, 2010; John Paul II, 1979).

Students who learn how to engage in this process of critically evaluating culture during their school years will be better prepared to build relationships with others after they have graduated from school. To strain out the myriad messages in the world today advocating separation, hold onto religious principles emphasizing relational living, and reach out to others is challenging, but Catholic schools can uniquely prepare their graduates to meet this challenge by making relationship building the keystone of their educational programs.

Catholic educators must regularly assess whether or not they are providing a unique educational experience that will enable students to evaluate the world critically and seek to build relationships. Figure 3 is provided as a means to help educators engage in this assessment process (see also Figure 2).

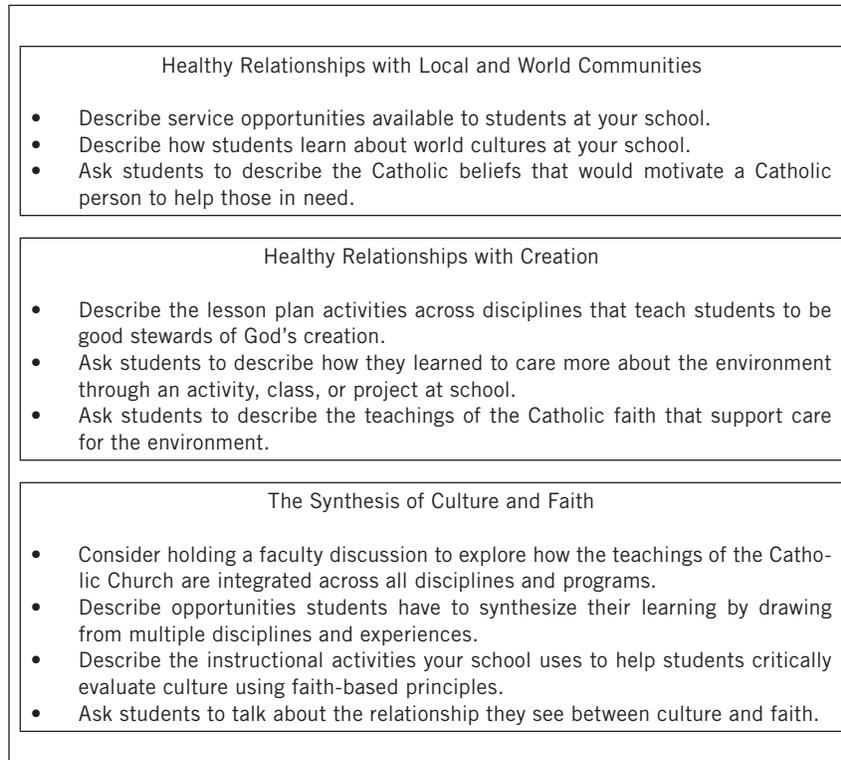


Figure 3. Application of the framework to Catholic schools.

Conclusion

This will be a challenging century for Catholic elementary and secondary schools as they strive to maintain enrollments in a changing cultural context. We have argued in this paper that one way Catholic schools can meet this challenge is by refocusing their efforts. The framework presented in this article provides clear educational objectives and can be used to assist schools in this process of redefining themselves. The application of the framework to Catholic schools presented in Figures 2 and 3 gives educators a place to begin the process of educational change. If Catholic schools embrace this process of re-envisioning their purpose, they will be able to clarify what sets them apart from all other schools, more effectively recruit students, and enable their graduates to change the world by building relationships instead of fences.

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