



Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association

BRIDGE BUILDERS

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.” – John 10: 11

The title of this document, ‘*bridge builders*’ owes its name to a Latin word ‘*Pontifex*’, which translates into English as ‘*Bridge Builder*.’ Dating from Roman times, it is a title ascribed to a person or persons who try to build a link to the sacred. Today, our Holy Father, Pope Francis bears the title of Pontifex Maximus – the Greatest Bridge Builder. Aside from those who really are involved in the construction of physical bridges, the term, ‘*bridge builder*’ is used to describe those persons who reach out to each other in the promotion of a common cause.

Introduction

In publicly-funded Catholic Education in the Province of Ontario three vital components converge – the home, the parish and the school. Each component has its own particular function but find a unifying common factor in the person of the child/parishioner/student. This person is a unique child of God who is entrusted to be nurtured in body, soul, spirit and mind by parent, teacher, priest and principal. We speak of the triad of home, parish and school and their convergent and divergent responsibilities relative to this person. Home, parish and school each must play a vital role in the physical, social, moral, intellectual and spiritual development of this human person.

Purpose

OCSTA examined one particular aspect of the home-parish-school triad, namely, the relationship between the parish and the Catholic school and specifically the relationship between the pastor of the local parish and the local Catholic school principal. This relationship is deemed to be of a very critical nature because it can very much establish a dynamic cohesion of common interest in the education of the growing student. In conjunction with the student’s parents and teachers, the local pastor and the school principal complement the total educational growth of the child in a specifically Catholic context.

Catholic Education is not confined to the school. Catholic education begins in the home, is nourished by the Eucharist and Sacraments and the life of the parish, and is sustained and

grounded in the school. Catholic education is intended as a mutually supportive partnership within the specific and respective responsibilities of each partner.

The *Enduring Gift* of publicly-funded Catholic Education is a community experience. Home, parish and school play a crucial role within their distinct and respective responsibilities. It is recognized that in the parish and the Catholic school, the common factor that involves us all in this noble enterprise is the child/student. Fortunately, we are not alone in this joint enterprise. The Holy Spirit is always with us.

Current Realities

Since 1984 there have been significant changes in Catholic parishes and schools because of geography, density, demographics and ethnicity. Society has become profoundly secular. The cultural context has changed. Generational differences exist among parents, students, teachers, pastors and administrators. Since the extension of funding to Catholic Secondary Schools and the legislation that established that funding, non-Catholic students can access our Catholic secondary schools, and in some Catholic schools the numbers of these students are significant.

Although Catholic schools are guaranteed by constitutional law, funding of such schools requires adherence to the regulations of the Ministry of Education. The publicly-funded Catholic school operates under the Education Act of the province of Ontario and while the curriculum is mandated by the Ministry of Education, in a Catholic school it is infused by gospel values and delivered by Catholic teachers who are trained and supported for this mission. Beyond their duties as school principals, Catholic principals are called to be the spiritual leaders of their schools.

The Nature of Leadership

Leadership at the school and parish level is subject to constant change. It is in the nature of the position of both principal and pastor that it is transitory. The local Bishop makes parish changes; the Director of Education through the local Superintendent authorizes principal moves. During their time in the Catholic school system, which may be as much as fourteen years, students are very likely to experience several changes in pastors and principals. Differing personalities and leadership models can affect the dynamic of the pastor-principal relationship. These changes, made by bishops and directors, have considerable impact on the parish-school relationship.

Throughout its history, the Catholic Church has emphasised the importance of providing leadership in the field of education. Catholic education is an integral part of the mission of the Church. Evangelization is at the core of the mission of the Catholic school. The infusion of gospel values is filtered through all the practices of the school. Catholic schools continue the mission of the Church in bringing the Good News to all people.

The consent of the responses from all the Catholic education partners to the OCSTA White Paper was a powerful affirmation of the importance of the Pastor-Principal relationship in the context of publicly-funded Catholic Education. Given the fact that the duties of a pastor or a principal in today's society is demanding, stressful and time-consuming, somehow time and opportunity must be created to establish and consolidate a working relationship between pastor and principal.

Ontario is a vast province ranging from large urban areas to small towns and villages, to wide open spaces where distance and weather play a critical role. There are urban parishes with numerous Catholic schools within its parish boundaries, and there are schools which draw students from several parishes. It is recognized that a single model for a working relationship will not fit all!

This Moment of Promise

In their singularly significant Pastoral Letter on Catholic Education in Ontario, *This Moment of Promise*, the Bishops of Ontario say to pastors –*Through your priestly ministry, the sacramental life of the Church can signify and make present the mysteries of faith which gather together and sustain a Catholic educational community.* To principals the Bishops address these words –*As no one else, you who are principals and vice-principals have a unique opportunity to create the character of your school. The life, the values, and the feeling of each school derive in large part from your commitment to your staff, to your students and to the gospel.*

This Moment of Promise wisely recognizes that the challenges we face in Catholic Education are shared by all. It recognizes that tension and difficulty will beset us and that cooperation does not exclude disagreements and even honest conflicts of opinion. *However, it does imply that we engage each other as Christians, as partners and not as adversaries.* [Page 32]

In their follow-up document in 1993 – *Fulfilling the Promise*, the Bishops state that the leadership of Catholic school administrators should be marked by, ‘a *deep commitment to evangelization and life-long faith development*’ and ‘*an openness to collaboration with the clergy.*’ The Bishops conclude with these words : *As your bishops, we are so very grateful for all that you do, and want to assist you in any way we can. You have our prayers, and our commitment to work with you in our common mission for the children and your people in our schools.*

Building the Pastor, Principal Relationship

Recognizing the multiple variations and situations that attend Pastor-Principal relationships throughout Ontario, and welcoming the humanity and varying gifts of all those involved in this magnificent enterprise called Catholic Education, the following items of understanding may be viewed as self-evident.

- * Is there a mutual understanding as to the reality of the nature of the very secular society in which both parish and Catholic school exist, and the challenges which that reality poses for both institutions? The secular culture challenges both the Church we want to be and the Catholic education we want to do.
- * A mutual agreement that publicly-funded Catholic Education is an enduring gift
- A mutual recognition that a working Pastor-Principal relationship is desirable
- A mutual recognition that such a working relationship is possible
- A mutual recognition that each is competent in their particular responsibility
- A mutual recognition that both are involved in the work of evangelization
- A reciprocal understanding by the partners that both work from differing yearly calendars – the Liturgical calendar and the school year calendar
- A mutual agreement that, being human, the possibilities of difference of opinion may arise
- A mutual agreement that both cooperation and understanding are very beneficial.

Bishops and Directors of Education

Critical to the success of the Pastor-Principal relationship is the support and the importance that is ascribed to the relationship by the local Bishop and the local Director of Education. This may be as simple as a yearly letter to principals and pastors emphasizing their expectation that the relationship be considered important to them. However, flexibility as to time and place is to be understood with recognition that ‘one size will not fit all.’ Scheduled meetings between the local Ordinary and the Director(s) of Education are highly recommended. The ultimate responsibility for an effective pastor/principal relationship rests with the local Ordinary and the local Director of Education, but the reality is, that given the responsibilities that rest on those shoulders, it may be sufficient that they clearly articulate the importance in which they hold the relationship, and stipulate that it be a recurring agenda item when they meet. Bishops and Directors can give direction and support, but Bishops and Directors cannot be expected to monitor every local scene. Bishops generally enjoy a good relationship with Trustees which may be a model for the pastor-principal relationship.

Given the very varied difference in size among dioceses and school boards, the responsibility may possibly need to be delegated to Associate Bishops and local Superintendents. The interest and involvement of the Bishop and Director gives credibility and importance to the relationship. Being human, there is no expectation that each relationship will be a mirror-image of another.

The personalities and comfort level of each participant will determine the nature of the relationship. The important factor is that there is a working relationship.

Pastor and Principal

It is important that an initial meeting of pastor and principal happen in an atmosphere of hospitality and welcoming. The sharing of a cup of coffee or a meal may help to establish an atmosphere of mutual understanding. This may be very helpful in dealing with subsequent challenges should they arise. As previously indicated, the Liturgical Year and the School Year do not coincide. However, for students, parents and school staff, the First Tuesday in September is a very significant date – a new school year is beginning. For the parish, the First Sunday in Advent heralds in a new Liturgical Year and its importance in the life of the Church. The ‘beginnings’, for both school and parish are not isolates but are an integral part of the yearly cycle of a Catholic community.

The Role of the Teacher

Important as the relationship between the pastor and the principal may be, a central figure in the entire educational enterprise is the classroom teacher. More than principal, pastor or even parent, the teacher’s interactions with students, and the learning process, in which they are involved, is at the very heart of education. Be it Junior Kindergarten or Grade 8, or high school, a visit by the local pastor to that classroom establishes a solid manifestation of the home, parish, school link in Catholic Education. The teacher and the pastor seen together, establish a visible link as to the convergence of their individual missions.

Secondary Schools

The situation in Catholic Secondary schools is significantly different from that of an elementary school. A Catholic secondary school, though it is geographically located within the boundaries of a specific parish, will draw students from several parishes. Secondly, since the passing of Bill 30 students who are not Catholic may access a Catholic secondary school for admission. Several Catholic secondary schools, particularly in urban areas, have a significantly high percentage of non-Catholic students. These students are welcomed as part of a Catholic school community and the legitimate demands of their religious practices are respected. Thirdly, Catholic secondary schools may have the services of a chaplaincy leader and/or a chaplaincy team, whom the principal may delegate to be the contact person with the local pastor or pastors. Historically, this relationship, and the role of the chaplaincy team leader, has proven to be effective in maintaining a mutually supportive connection with the local parish or parishes. Both participate in the evangelizing mission of the Church.

Moving to Implementation

Since both parish and Catholic school share, with parents, in the ongoing evangelization of that most precious gift – children, a workable simple implementation plan at the Board/Diocese level, and the local parish/school level is desirable. Since this is dealing with human relationships and personalities, allowance is needed to be made for local conditions. Many elements go to the framing of relationships, not the least of which is the personalities of the individuals involved. There may be occasions where a resolution of local differences may require some external help. However, there must be opportunities for the parties to dialogue. Patience and prayer will eventually contribute to a working reality.

- **Getting to know you**

Pastors and Principals may not be aware that a new person has been appointed to the school or the parish. The borders of either the parish or the school are unlikely to be coterminous. When a pastor is newly appointed, then a courtesy call from the local principal(s) welcoming him to the parish makes the initial contact. Conversely, if the principal is newly appointed to the school, the pastor may wish to make the initial contact of welcome. The location of these meetings should vary between school and parish. As we observed above, hospitality creates a tremendous opportunity to share meaningful conversation about the students and families within the larger community.

- **Setting an agenda**

Having made an initial meeting, it is critical for both to create an agenda that covers events for the upcoming year. It is important that both realize that the yearly calendars do not coincide. The Church year calendar begins on the First Sunday in Advent; the school calendar begins on the first Tuesday in September. For Catholic elementary schools, one of the most critical events of the year is the preparation of students for the reception of the Sacraments of Reconciliation, Eucharist and Confirmation. This preparation involves home, parish and school. Since the Sacraments rightly belong with the parish, the ultimate responsibility for preparation rests there. However, the Religious Education curriculum in the Catholic elementary school at specific grade levels covers material relevant to the preparation of the specific Sacraments. Parish and school should complement each other in this preparation, cognizant of the distinctive role of each partner. The role of the school and of differing personnel within the school at the actual celebration of the Sacraments should be clearly outlined.

- **Deanery/Regional Meetings**

Contemporary experience has demonstrated that some mutual understanding and the discussion of shared topics of possible cooperation or conflict, may be achieved at either Deanery meetings established by the local Ordinary, or regional meetings called by the regional Superintendent of Education. These meetings may afford an opportunity to

discuss concerns of a more general nature or of a specific topic engendered by the Board or the Diocese. It is anticipated that such a meeting should take place on a yearly basis, or more often should the occasion arise.

- **Conclusion**

Since its inception in 1841, publicly-funded Catholic Education has prided itself on its foundation of home, parish and school. The passages of time, the explosion of knowledge, the world wide spread of information and the rapid advance of technology have made the bonding of relationships more difficult to sustain. The demands on our time and our presence are insistent and many. Home, school and parish are not immune from the tyranny of instant and insistent communication.

To meet this challenge in the relationship between principal and pastor will call for patience and persistence on both sides. With the help of the Holy Spirit, this will happen.

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. [Romans 12: 4-5]

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