

**A TIME TO RENEW:
A Synthesis of the
Ignatian Roundtable Discussions**

2017
the
mustard seed project



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A —TIME TO— RENEW

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Introduction:

The Mustard Seed Project: Inclusive Practice in Catholic Schools is a conference that explores the important topic of serving students with disabilities within the Catholic school setting. The conference, in its fourth year, has grown continually in attendance. This year, the conference hosted over 200 participants from 16 different states. This year's theme, **A Time to Renew**, challenged participants to reinvigorate their efforts to meet the needs of all students and renew their focus on Catholic identity. The conference spanned two days.

Day One of the conference featured a number of professional development sessions which highlighted promising practices and provided practical lessons from Catholic school professionals and clinicians on inclusive practices in Catholic schools.

Day Two of the conference features facilitated working sessions and networking. Participants attended an Ignite-style presentation on an aspect of inclusionary practice in Catholic schools. Ignite-style presentations are concise and focused “mini presentations” that feature an idea or concept around the central theme of the conference. Then using a structured group process after each ignite session, conference attendees had the opportunity to work together to identify and articulate actionable items to increase inclusive practices in Catholic schools. The goal was to gather the collective wisdom of the group in a document that can help to inform the future work in this area. The purpose of this paper is to synthesize the ideas emerging from the conference and inform future action to promote inclusion in Catholic schools.

Ignatian Roundtable Experience

The Ignatian Roundtable Experience is grounded in elements of Ignatian pedagogy. The experience starts with the setting of **context**. A speaker presented a short presentation (no longer than 10 minutes). At the conclusion of each context session, the speaker introduced the guiding question.

Participants were then invited to go their assigned HOME table to **experience** a discussion about the guiding question. Each table had a “host” who guided and facilitated the conversation. Markers and chart paper were provided to record elements of the discussion. After 20 minutes, participants were invited to go to an AWAY table to continue the discussion.

At the AWAY table, participants reported a quick summary of each participant's HOME table discussion. Participants then **reflected** on the guiding question and each participant's conversations from their HOME table. Reflecting on this information, participants were asked to share insights and thoughts. The table host's role was to ensure that these new ideas are recorded on the chart paper on the table.

Upon conclusion of the session, the chart paper was gathered and the results of discussions have been distilled into a final product. After completion of the conference, members of the Andrew M. Greeley Center for Catholic Education analyzed the responses from the various groups. Themes were identified and supporting comments were noted. This paper is the resulting product of this analysis and represents the collective wisdom of the group.

Round 1

IGNITE SESSION: Shifting Mindset to Embrace Inclusion

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Many administrators, parents, and diocesan staff across the country have experienced the challenges of pioneering inclusive efforts in their schools. It is not uncommon to be met with resistance and to encounter stakeholders who do not share the same beliefs relative to Catholic school inclusion.

During this Ignite session, Dr. Morten shared her experience as principal of a Catholic elementary school when the school opened its doors for the first time to a student, Hannah, with a significant intellectual disability. Dr. Morten recounted the gratifying successes as well as the frustrations and challenges as teachers, parents, and students navigated this shift to an inclusive mindset.

Through the course of Hannah's preschool through 8th grade experience, while some teachers embraced the inclusive efforts, others expressed fear related to her needs and concern that she and the other students were being underserved. Parents too, though less frequently, shared concerns about the financial impact on the school as well as the impact on the class environment or their child's experience.

It was the students, however, that fully embraced inclusion, with little to no effort on the school's part. At the end of their eighth-grade year, the students were surveyed on the benefits and challenges of being in an inclusive classroom. When asked, "Do you think it is important to include people that are different from you in your class (people of different abilities, of different races, with different family income levels, etc.)?" 100% of the students said yes.

One student expressed, “It is important to be inclusive because inclusion helps keep us open-minded and welcoming to people who are different from us. Everybody should have an equal learning opportunity.” Another student commented, “What I have learned from being in an inclusive classroom is that I can be patient and helpful toward others. I think having an inclusive classroom has helped me to build those skills.”

In reflecting upon the difference in mindset of the students as compared to some teachers and parents, Dr. Morten identified a few potential factors. First, the students were given opportunities to express their fears and get their questions answered by Hannah's parents and by the teachers in an open and non-judgmental manner. Second, for her classmates, there was no other option but inclusion. Hannah had always been a part of the class community, and they couldn't imagine another option. And third, the students let the relationship transform them. Hannah was their friend and she brought them joy, therefore she belonged.

Conversely, teachers were given little time to explore their own fears and beliefs relative to inclusion and there was an absence of explicit and consistent messaging from school and parish leadership related to a commitment to inclusion. Also, in communications with the teachers more emphasis was placed upon meeting Hannah's academic needs as compared to building classroom community.

Inviting the participants to reflect upon this experience and their own experiences with inclusion, the following essential question was considered:

Essential Question:

What are the strategies we can use to help change the mindsets of various stakeholders about serving students with disabilities?

ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION

Through the series of roundtable discussions, participants identified three major strategies to help change the mindsets of various stakeholders about serving students with disabilities:

- Recognize Fears and Provide Opportunities to Reflect on the Value of Inclusion
- Redefine the Mission and Commit to Consistent Messaging Related to Inclusion
- Align Resources to the Priority of Inclusion

1 *Recognize Fears and Provide Opportunities to Reflect on the Value of Inclusion*

Participants echoed the experience related in the Ignite session that “teachers are afraid but the students are accepting.” One fear identified was the fear of the unknown. Teachers may have had little exposure or interaction to persons with disabilities and may feel afraid of what the expectations will be or hesitant about how to interact with the students. They may also have a limited definition of inclusion and imagine that the school will suddenly serve many students from disability categories with which they have little to no training. For many teachers, it can be comforting to broaden the definition of inclusion encompassing students with mild learning disabilities, speech and language disabilities, and processing difficulties. As one participant noted, it can be helpful to point out that “these students are already in their classrooms” and they have successfully adjusted their instruction to serve these students.

Another strategy to combat the fear of the unknown is to “show, don't tell,” creating opportunities for stakeholders to develop an emotional and personal connection to serving students with disabilities. While this may come with time and experience in developing relationships with students with disabilities in the school community, some participants shared ideas on how to explicitly plan these experiences. One high school shared how they used a teacher professional development day for the teachers to engage in simulations to personally understand the experience of a student with dyslexia.

Further, a staff member shared her personal testimony about having dyslexia and how it impacted her school experience. The teachers found this experience to be very moving and there was an increased sense of collective buy-in to the inclusive efforts of the school after that day. Other participants suggested having parents and alumni share testimonies of their experiences with inclusion with teachers, students, board members, or parishioners.

2

Redefine the Mission and Commit to Consistent Messaging Related to Inclusion

Stakeholders can also be resistant to inclusion because in most cases Catholic schools have not historically served students with disabilities and therefore they feel it is not a requirement or expectation of the Catholic school. In fact, for some, the exclusivity of a Catholic school may be a part of the reason why they chose to teach in Catholic schools or send their children to Catholic schools.

A resounding theme in the participants' responses to this question was to redefine the mission of Catholic schools and educate stakeholders on how inclusion fits with that mission. First and foremost, our Catholic faith asserts that by virtue of our baptism, we all belong to the body of Christ. An inclusive school fully embraces the mission of the Catholic Church, and as one participant noted, “being inclusive makes you even more Catholic.”

Many Catholic school teachers, board members, and parents have little exposure to Church documents, therefore a useful strategy to shift mindset is to have teachers read and reflect upon excerpts from documents written by the United States Conference for Catholic Bishops (USCCB), the National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD) and from our Holy Fathers to reflect upon the direct call to the Catholic schools to open their doors to all. Most stakeholders would find it surprising to learn that Catholic schools were asked to “integrate students with disabilities into programs of regular education (30)” by the American bishops almost 40 years ago in the “Pastoral Statement of US Catholic Bishops on People with Disabilities” (NCCB, 1978).

Participants pointed out that stakeholders should also have the opportunity to reflect upon the connection between Catholic Social Teachings and the Catholic school's inclusive mission. Welcoming students with disabilities into Catholic schools addresses most every Catholic Social Teaching and in particular the call to family, community and participation and the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable.

Through a process of redefining the mission of the Catholic school, participants noted that it is important to distinguish a private school from a Catholic school, especially since a “private school mentality” can be prevalent in the parent community or with the school board. A symptom of the “private school mentality” is a fixation on standardized test scores to define academic excellence and a fear that inclusion may impact the school's average scores or a particular student's experience. It is important to carefully define academic excellence in the context of the Catholic school. One participant reminded us that the National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools (NSBECS) can be a useful tool to redefine academic excellence in the Catholic context. The NSBECS state that curricular experiences which are “rigorous, relevant, research-based, and infused with Catholic faith and traditions” characterize academic excellence. Similarly, schools that embrace inclusive instructional practices are employing these “rigorous, relevant, research-based” curricular experiences, thus improving the experience for all students.

Once the inclusive mission of the Catholic school has been defined, there must be consistent messaging of that mission from diocesan and school leadership. At the school level, a principal, pastor, and the school board need to be aligned in support to serve students with disabilities. When there is consistent messaging from the top, teachers, parents, and students are clear that including students with disabilities is not on a trial basis but it is a firm commitment that aligns with our beliefs.

Further, diocesan priorities and messaging should support inclusive efforts. Some participants noted diocesan policies limiting the ability to modify curriculum, an overemphasis on academic achievement, and strict budget constraints that made school leaders reticent to embrace inclusion. On the other hand, participants shared examples of a commitment to inclusion from the diocesan level. One participant provided an example of how their Bishop sees inclusion as an opportunity to increase enrollment in their schools and challenges schools to develop supports for students of all abilities because it will ultimately lead to sustainability for the parish schools. The former example is the messaging which will encourage school leaders to shift their mindset and consider the advantages of inclusion.

If alignment does not exist among the pastor, principal, school board and diocesan office, they must circle back to the recommendation at the beginning of this section to have honest conversations about the fears and hesitations related to inclusion. Certain parties may need to be educated on the Church documents, on the educational research that demonstrates that all students benefit from inclusion or on creative options to finance inclusive supports.

3

Align Resources to the Priority of Inclusion

Participants in the round table discussions also noted that at times, teachers' mindset that they cannot serve students with disabilities in their classrooms is understandable considering the limited professional development, resources, and staffing allocated to this effort. One participant noted, "it is difficult to change mindset when the teachers don't have the resources or support staff to be successful." Other participants mentioned specific disability categories for which they felt completely unprepared, having received little to no formal training or education on understanding disability and specific instructional and management techniques.

Therefore, in order to change the mindset of teachers to openness to serving students with disabilities, schools must approach inclusion systematically. The Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework is a useful approach to examining school-wide programming to ensure that coherent, consistent, and best-practice curriculum, instruction, behavior management, and assessment practices are in place. The MTSS framework further defines the systems and structures that should be in place to respond at a Tier 2 and Tier 3 level for students who need additional support. Having school-wide systems and practices in place will help teachers to feel less individual pressure for figuring out how to do it alone. As administrators roll-out the MTSS framework in their schools, they must plan and deliver systematic professional development to build a common understanding of the approach and to develop teacher capacity.

Participants also suggested that schools capitalize upon the teacher leaders in their buildings, teachers who have specific knowledge, experience, or interest in serving students with disabilities. Through mentoring, these teachers can demonstrate successful strategies and support teachers as they try new practices in their classrooms. This peer to peer mentorship can build a culture of safety to take risks in the classroom and optimism that these strategies can lead to growth for the students.

Hiring practices and appropriate staffing were also identified by participants as essential components to shifting the mindset in a school. Understanding that inclusion is a priority for the school, principals, pastors, and diocesan staff should hire people with a belief and commitment to inclusion as well as seek to hire those with specific skills in special education or MTSS when possible. Principals must also be realistic about staffing the school appropriately considering the number of students they accept with disabilities as well as the services needed. Teachers will not believe in inclusion unless they are placed in a situation where they can be successful. Capping the class sizes for an appropriate student to teacher ratio, providing shared special educators or reading/math specialists, utilizing creative scheduling to capitalize upon Title I or district support, and the co-teaching model may provide the necessary supports for teachers.

Similarly, participants noted the disparity in diocesan supports dedicated to inclusion across the country. While some dioceses had specific staffing within the office to support schools in their inclusion or special education efforts, other diocese had no central office supports. When a diocese dedicates staffing and time to support and educate its schools on inclusion, principals and teachers will see the work as a priority and feel more equipped to carry it out.

During this roundtable experience, many useful strategies were identified to shift the mindset of stakeholders from “we can't” to “we can.” Through acknowledging fears and providing time to reflect on the value of inclusion, redefining and messaging a mission committed to inclusion, and aligning the resources to support the priority of inclusion, schools and diocese can invite many stakeholders to understand and support Catholic school inclusion.

Round 2

IGNITE SESSION: Collaboration within a Student Support Services Network

Jill Annable, Assistant Superintendent
of Catholic Schools
Diocese of Grand Rapids
Grand Rapids, MI

Collaboration is no accident. It is only the result of explicit strategies to coordinate these efforts.

“Without a sense of explicit organization, there is a **risk of creating a series of school-based programs that are operating in silos**. In order to avoid creating “pockets of innovations” where some schools are developing programs and others are struggling to create programs, there needs to be **a way to identify and share approaches to instructional supports for students with disabilities** (i.e. resources, special education consultants, network types of systems to work among the Catholic schools in a diocese) ...”

- NCEA *Exceptional Learners White Paper: One Spirit, One Body*

Ms. Annable shared her experience of becoming the Assistant Superintendent in Grand Rapids. When arriving to the job, she spent the first two months visiting schools and asking many questions. A huge insight occurred to her. There was a need to put everyone in the same room so that they could share their expertise.

“Diocesan offices of Catholic education can be in an important position of facilitating new kinds of collaboration among schools.”

- NCEA *Exceptional Learners White Paper: One Spirit, One Body*

Ms. Annable then described how she used her role as assistant superintendent to create systems to support and promote collaborations across the diocese.

Essential Question:
Where are the opportunities and conditions to increase collaboration between schools and dioceses?

ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION

Roundtable participants identified four conditions in which collaboration can occur.

Conditions Necessary to Increase Collaboration

Opportunities to Increase Collaboration

1

Conditions Necessary to Increase Collaboration

The *first condition*: we must normalize inclusion. We must acknowledge that some teachers, parents, board members, and clergy will be scared of the unknown. If you have never met a student with Down Syndrome, then you might not know how wonderful it would be to welcome a student with Down Syndrome into your school. However, we cannot restrict our ability to serve students with disabilities based on the fear of the unknown or a fear of a lack of resources. One educator posed this question: “what if we normalized inclusion?, If inclusion was the rule and not the exception in our Catholic schools, we might be ready for more collaboration across schools.

A *second condition* that must exist in order to increase collaboration is a belief in inclusion, a belief that inclusion is our calling as Catholics and a belief that inclusion benefits everyone in the school community. This belief and its prioritization must come from the leadership at the diocesan level. Participants agreed that when the diocesan leadership made it clear that they believe in inclusion, then attempting to include students with diverse abilities was more manageable than starting from scratch in a classroom or in a school. One diocese commented that it is diocesan policy to not provide any accommodations or modifications for students. This diocese is sending a clear message that they don't believe in or value inclusion, so it will be difficult for the teachers and leaders in that diocese to implement programs in their classrooms and schools.

It is safe to add that leadership on the school board as well as the pastor and principal must also believe in inclusion in order for it to be legitimized.

The *third condition* relates directly to the second: diocesan policies must support inclusion in order for inclusion to be a reality. As stated above, a diocese whose policies direct teachers to use instructional practices that do not support inclusion are sending a clear message: we don't believe in or support inclusion. The central, focused message from leadership is what schools – as well as parents and the local community - will hear, and it can lead to systems that support all students.

A *fourth condition* is the existence of collaborative structures. In order for inclusion to occur across schools, collaborative structures must exist within schools first. No one is an island, and no one person can make inclusion happen alone. Schools need to make use of structures like Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to analyze data and brainstorm solutions. Teacher Assistance Teams (TATs) are another structure that focuses directly on using collaboration to implement Response to Intervention. Purposeful, goal-oriented meetings facilitate collaboration because there is a goal in mind, a focus that everyone recognizes and can work to attain.

With these conditions in place, participants offered suggestions to increase collaboration among schools and dioceses. One theme that was consistent was the need for **collaborative professional development (PD) opportunities** that is differentiated in response to the needs of the schools and teachers. The suggestion for schools to have a similar calendar was made in order for schools to share PD opportunities. These types of collaborative sessions can cause “positive peer pressure” among educators. When one school, educator, or group of educators is implementing something that is clearly successful, positive peer pressure occurs when other educators say, hey –we should try that! Or Why aren't we doing that? Positive peer pressure can also be applied to Schools of Education at local universities. If the local university isn't a proponent of inclusion, schools and dioceses can apply a lever to garner that support. Partnering with Catholic and/or local universities can facilitate PD (assuming it is a university that believes in inclusion). Technology can also be a great opportunity when it comes to PD for schools in dioceses that are a far distance from one another. Either by using technology or within a school, the Ed Camp model was suggested by participants. This idea of gathering with other educators and proposing on the spot what topics interest you or you are curious about, and then the collaboration becomes personalized PD.

To build upon the within school collaborative structures such as grade-level or grade-band teams, or PLCs, school can form **learning networks across schools**. Participants suggested the formation of a Professional Learning Network (PLN) for special education directors to collaborate. The Diocese of Grand Rapids developed the Diocesan Student Support Services Network. This group consisted of representatives from each school, many of whom support inclusion in their role at the school, to share best practices and agree upon some common structures and procedures. Participants also suggested the use of technology to support teachers across large dioceses or between or among dioceses to collaborate.

Another opportunity suggested, which goes along with professional development is the idea of **sharing templates and resources**. One participant pointed out that we all don't need to "reinvent the wheel," nor do we need to all have completely different documents. Sharing resources could free up time for work with students.

Participants shared ideas about **collaboration with universities and community organizations**. Making connections, both with local universities as well as with parish ministries like Knights of Columbus, FIRE, SPRED, and the Pro-Life Committee or chapter in the parish, will increase the resources available for inclusive efforts. The suggestion was also made to connect with the local public schools and districts to possibly share resources and ideas.

The most large-scale opportunity that was suggested was the idea of **advocacy for public change**. Participants agreed that it is hard to advocate for and employ inclusion one person at one school at a time. Bringing national attention to inclusion in Catholic schools could provide more opportunities for more students and families.

Round 3

IGNITE SESSION: Considering Resources and Finding Balance

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There is an inherent press between finding ways to provide a just education to those students with disabilities and striking balance with the school's financial resources. Drawing from the recent results of the National Benchmarking Survey (Boyle, Bernards, and Davoren, 2017), it was noted,

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.

Although it is easy to use finances as a reason to not provide service, there are schools that are finding ways to strike this balance. Attendees were then introduced to “We can if” thinking from “A Beautiful Constraint.” Morgan and Barden suggest:

Using the deceptively simple structure of starting each sentence with “We can... if...” keeps the focus on how it might be possible, not whether it might be possible, forcing people to find solutions rather than more problems and keeping the oxygen of optimism alive in the process.

Inviting participants to use the “We can...if...” kind of thinking, the following essential question was considered.

Essential Question:

How can we leverage resources (financial, human and other resources) to increase opportunities for students with disabilities in Catholic Schools?

ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION

During the roundtable discussions, participants' responses for this question fell into two main categories, practical and aspirational. In the practical vein, participants identified five areas in which schools might be able to find better leveraging opportunities:

- 1) **Outside funding sources.**
- 2) **Partnerships.**
- 3) **Sharing resources.**
- 4) **Wider community.**
- 5) **Universal design for learning strategies.**

From a more aspirational or visionary perspective, participants identified several skills and habits that leaders need to develop and nurture in order to successfully leverage resources to support students with disabilities in Catholic schools.

Practical Strategies for Leveraging Resources

Aspirational Habits That Can Leverage Resources

1

Practical Strategies for Leveraging Resources

Outside Funding Sources: In the practical realm, participants referred to the need to better leverage outside funding sources, such as District/Title funding and grants, possibly using economies of scale to help get the maximum benefit from limited dollars. This requires schools to collaborate in order to identify common needs and develop a mutual plan for addressing those needs. These collaborating schools can then identify opportunities to pool funding for programs and possibly even share human resources by splitting the salary for various resource personnel to serve in more than one school.

Grant applications often become much more appealing to funders when there is the possibility for their investment to have an impact across a larger population than a single school. Creating and maintaining these kinds of efficiencies across multiple sites can be extremely challenging, but it can also allow sites access to resources that would otherwise be beyond their budgetary constraints.

Participants also expressed that “every penny counts” so schools should encourage their community's participation in any and all corporate funding programs available, such as Amazon Smile, United Way, Target's Redcard, Publix, etc. Funds from these types of programs can quickly add up to significant “extra” cash for schools at no (or little) added expense to participants, a true win-win situation.

Partnerships: The participants suggested exploring partnership possibilities between Catholic schools and universities, as well as businesses. Partnerships with universities can provide the schools with access to quality professional/expert resources and supports. For example, university faculty might be able to provide ongoing professional development, building teacher capacity to meet the diverse needs of students in their classrooms. University partnerships can also give a school access to the most current research in education as well as access to experts for advice when new and/or complicated situations arise and school leaders or teachers are at a loss for how to handle it. University partnership can also help a school build a teacher and leadership pipeline by accepting student teacher placements and/or working with graduate students pursuing advanced degrees in education, counseling or social work.

Roundtable participants shared that business partnerships with schools can come in many different forms. Some examples were focused on facilities management including corporate services days. Garnering the expertise that is present on the school board (areas of marketing, finance, facility management) can also be ways to support the Catholic school. Although not directly impacting the service delivery to students with disabilities, these kinds of partnerships can assist the school in using the financial resources that might have otherwise have been directed to these areas and utilize them for direct programming.

Sharing Resources: Roundtable participants shared that Catholic schools who develop programming for students with disabilities are, by and large, operating in isolation. There is a need to systematize forums to share resources. Many of the participants suggested that the National Catholic Educational Association could offer the platform to host a national clearinghouse on promising practices. This offers Catholic schools the opportunity for “one-stop shopping” so that they can have access to quality, vetted resources that reflect a Catholic school context. Another suggestion was the taking advantage of technology to connect schools. Virtual Learning Communities, through various platforms, offer great hope to connect Catholic educators and to maximize resources.

Engaging the Wider Community: Roundtable participants' comments suggested that there is a strong need to engage the community as a whole. On the local level, it was suggested that Catholic schools could involve parishioners with specific expertise. Some participants reported that they were able to successfully engage parishioners that are clinicians and were able to deliver related services (i.e. speech and language therapy) on site. Other participants suggested that retired parishioners with expertise (retired special education teachers) could be tapped to serve as coaches to Catholic school faculty, enabling the retired parishioner to continue to share their gifts without having to work full time.

On a larger scale, participants spent some time discussing the engagement of other parishes in these efforts. Parishes with more resources, especially those without schools, may serve as partners to those schools employing more inclusive approaches. These parishes may be willing to support these inclusionary efforts through gifts of time, talent and treasure.

Universal Design for Learning Strategies: Roundtable participants also observed that if schools implemented the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach, it would redefine the teaching expectation within the school, embedding the expectation that teachers plan deliberately for ALL learners, rather than individualizing instruction.

Since UDL emphasizes student engagement and empowerment, the students help share the responsibility for the inclusive learning environment. While fully implementing the UDL approach with fidelity takes time initially, the more thoughtfully and deliberately a faculty work to develop their understanding and capacity for this approach can save each teacher time, energy and frustration over the long haul. The cohesion of the instructional program under the UDL approach does not add to a teacher's workload, but rather it helps make the workload more efficient and effective.

2

Aspirational Habits That Can Leverage Resources

Align Vision with Mission and Share It: Participants of the Ignatian Roundtable observed that it is critical for leaders to ensure the alignment of their vision for their school with the mission of their school (and parish). This alignment is essential to creating coherence between various efforts to move a school forward and the community's commitment to that vision. The question was raised “can we build a different kind of community instead of a new structure?” This idea proposes a redefining of the school community, clarifying the mission and articulating a clear vision of how to bring that mission to life. In doing this, the opportunity is created for the members of the community to actively commit (or possibly re-commit) to the mission and vision. The clear articulation of mission and vision also helps to drive decisions about the prioritization of how local resources are used. Once a school identifies who we are and what they are about, they are better able to articulate what supports are needed to bring that mission to life. Then, it is their challenge to find and access those necessary supports.

Build Relationships: Roundtable participants' responses suggested two levels of building relationships. There was a need to build relationships with potential funders to develop an awareness in inclusionary approaches. By connecting donors to real life examples of delivery models could help build the personal investment necessary to procure different levels of support. Board members are often critical in connecting the school with donors and advancing the mission.

Participants noted that school leaders must cultivate relationships with board members so that they have a strong understanding of inclusion and the resources necessary to advance that mission.

Be Creative and Develop the Courage to Ask: Roundtable participants expressed the need for leaders to be willing “to examine what you've always done” so that opportunities for new approaches can be surfaced and explored. Participants explored the idea of looking at what are generally considered to be limitations or constraints, and redefining them as opportunities or challenges to be creative and “think outside the box.” Using creative scheduling to allow for shared personnel across schools, pooling material resources into a co-op resource center where staff from multiple schools can “borrow” the materials to use when needed, or coordinating professional development opportunities across multiple schools to support a more differentiated approach to professional development are just some of ways schools have leveraged creativity to support their inclusion efforts.

There was a sense among participants that leaders need to reach out and ask for what is needed from as many sources as possible and “not be afraid of hearing no.” That in asking the worst that can happen is the answer is no, and while that no doesn't move the effort forward, it doesn't move it backward either. In sharing these needs with many potential funding sources, leaders also create the opportunity for multiple avenues of support to be generated, in effect, creating collaborations across multiple sources to support a common goal.

Being Reflective: The participants acknowledged that, for some, this is new territory. The path to inclusion in Catholic schools is not clearly marked and there may be some meandering that can occur. Many of the comments from the participants suggested that there is a strong need for being reflective. In order not to stray from the mission, the leaders and other key players will need to critically reflect on the journey, especially in times of trial, to help stay the course.

SYNTHESIS AND NEXT STEPS

Throughout the progression of the Ignatian roundtable discussions, three main themes emerged: Recognize Fears, Enhance Knowledge, Build Community.

SYNTHESIS

Recognize Fears

An emergent theme evident throughout the series of discussions was that fear can be a major stumbling block to successful adoption of inclusionary approaches. Sources of fear came from a number of places: whether it was fear from teachers not having the necessary skills to address the needs of the student with disabilities to overwhelming concerns that various community stakeholders may have negative perceptions of the school because of inclusion. From the discussions, it seemed that many participants were concerned that these negative perceptions could have an adverse impact on enrollment and potentially the vitality of the school. It was an emerging consensus from the Ignatian Roundtable participants that a counter narrative around inclusionary approaches was needed. The “good news” of the benefits of these approaches needs to be extolled to counter the fear-based perceptions that stakeholders may have. Participants cited many examples of the positive effects of inclusionary approaches within their respective school settings. These examples can serve as a tool to provide the basis of the powerful positive narrative focused on inclusionary practice.

Enhance Knowledge

It was clear from many of the participants' observations that there is a need for the development of a foundational approach to inclusionary practice. Possibly motivated through fear, the shared experience of the participants suggested that initially there is not a clear understanding on the parts of their colleagues about inclusion. Some participants reported that there is a belief that the public schools are the only method to address the needs of a student with a disability. This belief seems to fuel a lack of willingness to engage in attempts to serve students with disabilities.

Build Community

Inclusionary approaches in Catholic schools cannot be isolated initiatives. An overwhelming theme threaded through many of the conversations was the focus on using a community approach. Examples of effective inclusionary approaches were almost always framed within a community context—students, parents, and faculty and pastor. Where there were instances of less effective programming, one of the reasons cited was lack of the community support. One of the strengths of the Catholic school is community. This strength needs to be utilized when designing and delivering approaches to serving students with disabilities.

NEXT STEPS

In reflecting on the conversations of the day, there is a great need to continue to foster dialog among the many educators that are engaged in the process of providing options for students with disabilities in Catholic schools. No one person or institution has the answer on how to do this most effectively. It is apparent from the Ignatian Roundtable discussions that forums for on-going conversation, debate, and sharing are needed to support the many fine efforts that are currently in place.

A great sense of collegiality was observed throughout this conference and participants appeared to be heartened in their resolve after interacting with others of a like-mind. Conferences of this nature seem to be needed to help strengthen the resolve of Catholic school advocates in creating these kinds of programs.

Efforts for on-going professional development should be continued. Various formats and platforms can be used to decrease the isolation that some schools experience. Additionally, online formats can help to increase the sense of community that will be required to help sustain these efforts.

Finally...

As Pope Francis reminds us,

*The Holy Spirit upsets us because
it moves us,
makes us walk,
pushes the Church forward*

Our prayer should be to continually invoke the Holy Spirit to disrupt our thinking, cause us disequilibrium, and continually move forward to ensure that all students can be part of their faith communities.

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