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Faith in Action: Community Service and Service Learning Programs

Service programs have long been a hallmark of Catholic schools and a valued vehicle through which Catholic education promotes the Church's understanding of charity and justice. Any rationale for the existence of service programs often begins with the Gospels and the many examples of Jesus' "call to serve" shown through His words and actions on behalf of the poor, the sick, and those on the margins. While typical classroom experiences in religious formation and study can present this material to students in an academic context, it is the experiential nature of engaging in service that has been shown to have lifelong impact.

Today, Catholic schools begin serving the youngest children in preschool programs and continue to guide their moral and ethical development until they graduate from high school, perhaps to continue to pursue a Catholic education in college

and beyond. Ensuring that a service mindset is an integral part of a Catholic school curriculum and community is more important than ever.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops provides a compilation of Catholic School Research and Studies on its website in support of K-12 Catholic education. The Bishops point out that Catholic schools are "sacred places helping to build a better society." Presumably, engagement in service as students in Catholic schools initiates the service mindset that has far reaching and positive consequences. In support of this statement, research from Campbell (2001) is cited that: *Catholic school graduates are more civically engaged, more tolerant of diverse views, and more committed to service as adults, and less likely to be incarcerated than their public school peers.*

Comparing Catholic school students and programs to public school students and programs is a common activity for any family considering a Catholic school for the education of their children. While at one time service programs were typically only found in Catholic schools, this is no longer the case. Requirements for hours of service can today be found in public schools, private schools, and religiously affiliated schools. A 2014 report from the Education Commission of the States noted that 33 states include service learning in their state academic standards or frameworks, 24 states identify participation in service learning/community service as a means of preparing students for the workplace, 23 states allow or require school districts to award credit toward graduation for service learning, and 17 states identify service learning/community service as an instructional strategy that increases student achievement. Two states require high school students to complete a specified number of hours in a service learning or community service activity to graduate. Clearly, service is no longer just a hallmark of Catholic schools.

What Do Parents Want?

Going beyond a discussion of requirements, what do parents want for their children? Once again, the response in favor of providing today’s students with service-related experiences is

notable. The 2017 study conducted by NCEA in collaboration with the Catholic School Philanthropy Working Group concluded that while a focus on religious instruction does not drive parents’ choice of school today, an emphasis placed on community service/volunteerism is shown to be a consideration driver when choosing a Catholic school. This emphasis was noted as having predictive power to direct consideration of Catholic schools by all parents, but particularly by Catholic parents. Furthermore, this finding can be seen as reinforcing the research on generational preferences associated with Millennial/Gen Y parents in particular for the importance of civic duty and engagement.

Given the amount of research along with anecdotal evidence, it is not difficult to make a case for the continued importance of service programs in Catholic schools, nor is it difficult to understand how the existence of service programs has contemporary relevance for enhancing the value proposition for consideration of a Catholic school. Based on Catholic School Management’s work with hundreds of Catholic schools around the country, what can be challenging is:

1. Providing well-coordinated and implemented service programs;
2. Effectively communicating and marketing the positive contributions and outcomes of service programs.



COMMUNITY OUTREACH
Sacred Heart Parish School in Hollister, California, holds kindness as a core value and component of its mission. Students were provided with 10 ‘kindness’ coins to distribute to individuals, businesses, or organizations seen as exemplifying this value. Recipients were featured on the school’s social media channels, and, consequently, the school was featured on local news.

CSM SERVICES	Strategy	Planning	Leadership
	School and Program Assessments Visioning Enrollment Marketing Mission Clarification Advancement Alumni Latino Outreach Capital Campaigns	Enrollment Management Technology Annual Fund Development Marketing Communication Social Media Plans Strategic Planning	Governance Administrative Structure Search Board Training/Development Professional Mentoring Workshops and Webinars Retreat Facilitation Keynote Presentations Individual Seminars and Series

Expectations for Service Programs

When assessing a school’s service programs, Catholic School Management begins with a review of the types of service opportunities that exist. Normatively, it would be expected that a Catholic school would provide opportunities for both community service and service learning. The distinction is important and is central to the coordination of robust service programs. The chart below describes basic components of the scope of service activities that would be anticipated to be found in a well-coordinated program:



COMMUNITY SERVICE	SERVICE LEARNING
School-sponsored activities that involve the whole school community in acts of kindness and charity for those experiencing poverty or hardship: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food drives • Clothing drives • Donations of school supplies 	Community service or outreach activities aligned with particular curriculum content in each grade’s religious studies curriculum
School-sponsored activities as a whole school or by a grade/classroom/club in response to individuals or communities having suffered a natural disaster or traumatic circumstance	Retreat programs or “Days of Service” that align Church teachings with local community non-profit/service agencies or to support a community need or project (e.g., clean up days)
Outreach activities for those who are suffering or marginalized: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performances for those in hospitals or care facilities • Making food to be distributed through a service organization or shelter 	Service experiences woven into the core curriculum that complement and enhance understanding of the Christian message and include components for research and reflection
Completion of a required number of service hours as a donation of time to support the school, parish, community, or local service organization	Completion of a reflection component in addition to required service hours

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1 GUIDING PRINCIPLE NUMBER 1

Carefully coordinate and limit the number of service activities in which students and families are asked to participate that would typically, or easily, be fulfilled through a monetary donation or purchase.

Well-Coordinated Programs of Service

The most important expectation of which to be aware is that a commitment to service as a Catholic school should reflect a well-coordinated effort designed to convey that the concept of service is provided with regularity to all students, at all grade levels, and in a variety of formats. Too often when a prospective family tours a Catholic school campus and asks about the school's service programs, a typical response is, "Oh, yes. We do service. The students are always collecting things."

Unwittingly, the way in which the information as to the existence of well-coordinated and implemented programs of service is being conveyed is actually diminishing its potential to have impact of value. One of the last things a prospective parent wants to hear, especially one who may be considering actually paying for education for the first time, is that not only will they be paying for tuition, but there's going to be a steady stream of requests to 'collect' and 'donate' items as well, or be seen as being unsupportive of service activities.

While the age of students, developmental readiness, and suitability of service experiences will by necessity have impact on how programs of service can be designed for elementary versus high schools, there is still opportunity to design a service program and service curriculum that touches all grades. For elementary schools, consider how each grade can claim an annual service project and even a particular relationship and service contribution to a local parish, service organization, or non-profit. These projects may or may not be tied to particular curriculum objectives, yet the relationships built over time with community partners have potential to grow the overall image of the school in the broader community as well.

At the high school level, while there may be more options for how to connect students with service projects and community partner agencies, with this expanded opportunity comes increased responsibility to support, monitor, and track not only the quantity but the quality of service in which students will engage. The assignment of these responsibilities must be tied to role descriptions along with a clear designation of leadership expectations for

ensuring the ongoing coordination of service activities within the school. Equally important is the effective and consistent promotion of how service is an essential thread in the fabric of school mission and culture. Recognizing that engaging in service is tied to the building of college resumes and completion of college and scholarship applications provides an opportunity for cross-department collaboration between college counselors and campus ministry to assist in supporting, counseling, and monitoring student engagement in productive and meaningful service activities.

2 GUIDING PRINCIPLE NUMBER 2

Publish a rationale and calendar on the school website and in handbooks as to the coordination of service requirements, projects, activities, and/or curriculum-related service learning initiatives. Show this information organized by grade level, clubs/teams, and schoolwide activities along with connections to any community partners or agencies.

One of the greatest challenges at both the elementary and high school levels is creating authentic service programs, ones that change hearts more than tick boxes. This is particularly true in larger schools where the bookkeeping alone can be massive, and, therefore, it is easy to look to the number of hours more than the developing character of the student.

Some schools shy from service hour requirements for just this reason. Though these challenges are real, in those schools without a requirement, there must still be a means to

demonstrate that individual students have engaged in authentic service. There are two common methods used to integrate a requirement with true student formation. The first is post-service reflection. Ideally, reflection should be a part of every service activity. The second method is to incorporate a culmination project, preferably as an individual or group opportunity during the graduation year. However, to truly “teach” service, this culminating project and reflection should be worked into the classroom across the curriculum.

While Gospel-based reflection fits in naturally in the Religion curriculum, it also has relevance in other subject areas, such as a Social Studies assignment tying individual service to a thread of U.S. history; or, an English class identifying types of service in a work of literature.

An additional integration method is authentic schoolwide recognition of student service. In this case, authenticity means more than simply honoring those students who have accumulated the most hours. What should be recognized is the variety and effectiveness of service; projects that had impact on lives and not simply supported infrastructure. The community should be made aware of the good things that are being done, both for ideas and inspiration. To avoid confusing individual achievement with support for the value of service, an approach might be to recognize projects of merit without identifying the individual student or students who were involved. A school could recognize a “Service Project of the Month.” This would be instructive to the entire student body while recognizing that one does not engage in service for individual recognition.

Communicate and Market Positive Impact

A best practice for any Catholic school is to publish an annual report. Typically, an annual report includes not only a recognition of donors and outcomes of the school’s development and financial programs but also a summary of major achievements or milestones from the past year. Make a commitment to collect data that reflects the positive impact of service performed over the course of a year in the school community. Think of ways to go beyond just the listing of number of hours of service provided. How many meals were served and how many coats or cans were collected? What are the testimonials from students, parents, teachers, and the community members or others who were impacted by the school’s service program? Look for service in ways that may

3

GUIDING PRINCIPLE NUMBER 3

Put in place systems and procedures for gathering data, evidence, and testimonials as to the outcomes of annual service-related programs and activities. Publish these outcomes in annual reports, school profiles, recruitment materials, and on the school website and social media channels.

not normally be seen as service and find a way to quantify these activities.

For example, how many hours do the members of your school’s board contribute on behalf of the school? In April 2019, the Independent Sector released its latest computation for the value of a volunteer hour at \$25.43. How many hours went into running your school’s major event this year and what kind of donation to the school does that reflect?

Some Catholic schools take the idea of an annual report and apply it specifically to the publication of a report of all mission activities: required student service programs, curriculum-based service learning projects, service by student clubs and



Happenings at Kelly

Social Justice Project Still a Major Component of Kelly Education

by Clarisa Chavarria, Theology IV teacher

The Catholic Social Justice project continues to be part of one of the important elements of Kelly High School education. Its objective is to enhance the students’ understanding of social service (charity) and social change (justice) as two necessary aspects of faith in action.

[Read more](#) about the social justice project and how it continues to influence our seniors’ lives.

COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE

Monsignor Kelly Catholic High School, the only Catholic high school in the Diocese of Beaumont, Texas, and a four-year CSM Strategic Management and Development Program graduate, regularly reports on its programs of service and social justice in its electronic alumni newsletter.

organizations, campus ministry activities, faith development programs for the school's adult community, and so on. This method of reporting also gives the school an opportunity to emphasize the Gospel-based focus of school service as a differentiator from service programs in non-Catholic schools.

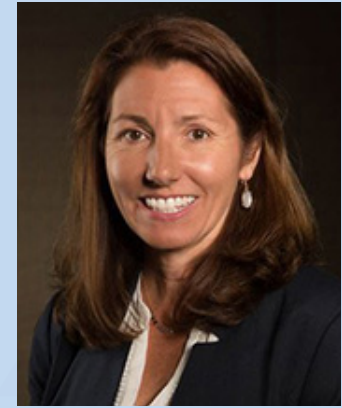
In advance of preparation of this issue of the *Catholic School Management Letter*, CSM used its social media channels to reach out to our followers to solicit nominations for schools to visit as examples of exemplary service programs. Thank you to the many followers who replied! As a division of Christian Brothers Services, it is our honor to share programs submitted from some of our Lasallian partners as well as other programs encountered in our work with schools. It is hoped that the examples provided as well as the list below are a starting point for dialogue and continued understanding of the ongoing importance of service programs for today's Catholic schools.

Mullen High School
Denver, CO

La Salle College Preparatory
Pasadena, CA

St. Michael's High School
Santa Fe, NM

Catholic Schools of the Diocese of Buffalo, NY



About the author ...

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Maria has been associated with Catholic education since 1992 and has also worked as a teacher and administrator in both public and private independent schools. In addition, she has training and experience in the design and marketing industry as a graphic designer and in visual merchandising.

A CSM staff member since 2001, Maria provides consultative guidance and oversees the delivery of consulting services in various areas directly related to the effective management of Catholic schools: mission clarity, governance models, board operations, and administrative structures and functioning. She coordinates CSM's distinctive Institutional Assessment and Strategic Management and Development Programs while also providing leadership and vision to client work in Strategic Planning for schools, school systems, and arch/diocesan offices of Catholic schools. In the areas of enrollment management, marketing and communication, she directs audits focused on enhancing market distinction and differentiation as well as best practices from recruitment to re-enrollment. She is a lead presenter for CSM seminars and workshops and has been a speaker at NCEA and ISTE among other conferences.

CREATIVITY AND CREATING HOPE

After fires in 2017 struck the State of California, Grade 8 students at San Carlos School in the Diocese of Monterey found a way to serve the devastated communities in Paradise and around the Santa Rosa area. Piles of hand-painted Kindness Rocks were delivered through a volunteer network of parents and friends to bring to survivors these symbols of hope, love, and faith.



A division of Christian Brothers Services

For more information about Catholic School Management, call 203.421.5169 or visit us at cbservices.org/csm.html.

Sign up to receive the *CSML*, visit cbservices.org/csml-sign-up.html or send an email to csml@cbservices.org.

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