

THE STRENGTH OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS RESTS ON THEIR MANAGEMENT

The concluding words of Catholic School Management's (CSM) statement of mission are:

In order to make certain that Catholic schools not only survive, but flourish, the staff of Catholic School Management believes that careful planning, sound management and effective leadership are the cornerstones of educational excellence.

Since its inception, a tenacious focus on understanding the unique management needs of Catholic schools, dioceses, parishes and religious orders has defined CSM's approach to its delivery of comprehensive consulting services, and to this day has been at the heart of why CSM is often referred to as the 'gold standard' in Catholic school consulting. Indeed, CSM's iconic logo design of the "C" and "S" initials stacked upon the "M" has provided, since 1979, a visual representation of the mission and message that the strength of a Catholic School rests on its Management.

How is it that this fundamental component of CSM's mission has withstood the test of time? Numerous CSM clients can provide vibrant testimonials to this success, and examining the path to success of Mary Help of Christians Academy serves to illustrate CSM's approach, and the value of "the CSM Way."



Mary Help of Christians Academy- From Best Kept Secret to Shining Star

The Limited Institutional Assessment

Late in 2016, Sr. Marisa DeRose, FMA, was the new Principal at Mary Help of Christians Academy in North Haledon, New Jersey. Enrollment had declined 35 percent since 2010, a dramatic situation especially for a small high school, dedicated to providing young women with a Catholic education enlivened with Salesian charism. She contacted CSM by email seeking our help. As Sr. Marisa explains it:

“I arrived as principal and I found a school community that was nervous and concerned about the future, but very much in love with their school and wanting its success. I knew where I wanted the school to go, but I was convinced that this was a job that was beyond me alone. I needed outside consultants to affirm my thinking.”

Sr. Marisa knew that current marketing efforts were ineffective, but her intuition told her that it would take more than just ‘better marketing’ to achieve the kind of turnaround she desired as well as arriving at a position of stability and strength for the long-term future of the school. CSM Founder Richard J. Burke returned a phone call in response to Sr. Marisa’s inquiry. This conversation yielded details as to the unique circumstances in which the school existed, at this point, in its mission. CSM made an initial prescription for the conduct of a Limited Institutional Assessment (LIA) for the Academy. The LIA is a flagship service of CSM that uses a multi-phased and faceted approach to reveal the root causes that are impacting a school’s ability to meet its desired goals. Not a stone was

left unturned as a team of skilled and experienced consultants, all with significant background and expertise in Catholic education, visited the school campus over a three-day period in October 2017 to conduct the on-site portion of the LIA.

A Road Map to Success

The results of the LIA revealed that there was much good news at the Academy. CSM identified significant and marketable strengths with regard to Catholic identity, the family atmosphere, the depth of commitment and caring shown by the faculty and staff, and various programs along with the joy of the young women students themselves. The commitment to the school from the Salesian Sisters of St. John Bosco, Province of St. Joseph, and the location of the school and province offices on an astoundingly beautiful and college-like 16-acre campus could not be undersold. Yet, there were numerous areas identified for improvement. A 60-plus page report included more than 60 recommendations to assist with enhancing the strength of all aspects of management at the Academy, from its governance and administrative structure to academic and student programs, and throughout the total advancement program of marketing, communication, enrollment and development. CSM provided a three-year path of priorities, and Sr. Marisa and her staff, with the full support of the Province, decided to proceed by accepting the full Report and all recommendations made within. Further commitment was made to partnering with CSM to ensure full achievement of the recommendations.



Effective Management: Structures, Plans, and Training

By the conclusion of the 2017 – 2018 school year a new administrative structure had been designed, and efforts were set in motion to develop bylaws for the school’s first governing board as a Board of Trustees. A seminar for all faculty and staff was provided on “The Role of the Professional Educator and Support Staff on Marketing the Catholic School for Image and Enrollment.” In addition, CSM supported the Director of Admissions in her preparation of a comprehensive Enrollment Management Plan along with consultation for enhancement of the school’s Marketing Plan. Under Sr. Marisa’s leadership, a compelling statement of vision was prepared to emphasize the Academy’s success in challenging the young women of today and inspiring them to be leaders of tomorrow. Over the summer, they had installed an Alumnae Coordinator to address a distressing lack of alumnae engagement, and a CSM Adjunct Consultant arrived on campus to provide one-on-one training and support for preparing a plan for first steps and priority activities.

Photo above: Planning Committee - CSM’s approach to strategic planning promotes that all processes should be highly participative and collaborative. The customized process designed for MHCA brought together a Planning Committee representative of new Trustees, staff, faculty, alumnae and diocesan partners. Even more community voices were included via a retreat-style and large-scale Day of Strategic Conversation.

Securing the Future through Strategic Planning

When school year 2018-2019 opened, Sr. Marisa was no longer principal, but was formally installed as the Head of School as part of a new administrative structure designed to support, more effectively, the critical needs of the school at this time in its mission. The school held a convocation ceremony in response to the suggestion of one of the new Trustees, and honored the inaugural members of this school’s first Board. They embarked on formal training for the Trustees and guidance in the establishment of a full committee structure, and they moved quickly into their role by providing leadership for a strategic planning process. By June 2019, a strategic plan was drafted, and ready to be unveiled for community consultation with the commencement of the 2019-2020 school year.

When asked which recommendation from the LIA has had the most far-reaching impact on the school, Sr. Marisa noted that it was the formation of the Board of Trustees. “Our school had been run more like a family, but we needed to change that and become more professionally managed without losing the distinctly Salesian emphasis on family-based culture. We needed expertise, and with the help of the Board, we are growing in ways we couldn’t have imagined.”

Lasting Results

While significant activity has been ongoing over the past two years, what are the tangible outcomes from this commitment to follow the path laid out by CSM to strengthen management in all areas? School year 2018-2019 opened with 56 young women in Grade 9 compared to 33 in the previous year, and a total enrollment increase of 17 students from the beginning of the previous school year. This school year, enrollment remains stable, and the number of students entering Grade 9 exceeds the number that graduated in Spring 2019. Retention also continues to be a strength of the overall program, which is now focused on a comprehensive approach to enrollment management, and not just on recruitment. Other data-based indicators of positive change include:

- Continued excellence of the academic product shown by all Class of 2020 Seniors enrolling in at least one math class, if not two, and continued acceptance of graduates to the colleges of their choice.
- Ongoing facilities upgrades with a new roof and gym floor as well as the groundbreaking in September 2019 for a new Chapel after an unfortunate fire in Spring 2018.
- Growth in the alumnae database resulting in more than 30 responses within 24 hours of sending out a request to be part of the school's first Alumnae Council.
- A Spring 2019 Career Day that exceeded its goal of bringing in 10 alumnae as speakers to accommodate the 30 that were proud to return to their alma mater.

And, of significant and indisputable importance, the broader community is taking notice of the school's positive image and value.

While working with other area Catholic schools in the Diocese of Paterson, CSM Senior Executive Consultant Maria J. Ribera was pleased to be told, "I don't know what happened at that school, but their star is certainly shining brightly. Good things are happening at Mary Help!"

Sr. Marisa shared the words of a new teacher recently asked to join the Mary Help staff, "My colleagues at my former school told me they've heard it's great here and asked me if I could get them a job here."



Role Workshop - Providing training to achieve optimal performance is part of CSM's statement of vision, and a fundamental component of "The CSM Way." A school's faculty and staff are best equipped to support strong enrollment culture when provided with an understanding of the role they can play in the effective marketing of a school for both image and enrollment.

As Sr. Marisa's intuition had told her from the very beginning, it would take more than just marketing to achieve her dreams for her beloved school. Even though there will always be more to do, strategic plans to be completed, and ongoing attention paid to the promotion of the positive image of the school, the strength of management at Mary Help of Christians Academy is in place to support a vibrant and vital future. From the Province, to the Board, to the administrative structure, to the faculty and staff, and the quality of the plans that guide the work of all involved, strong management is and will continue to be the keys to ongoing strength. CSM has been honored to accompany the MHCA community in every step of their journey and looks forward to celebrating every future success. ☀

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