

Leading for Excellence

ST. JOHN VIANNEY HIGH SCHOOL COURTESY PHOTOS



To create an excellent Catholic school, the leaders must be excellent themselves. They must not only believe in but manifest in their actions a passion for the school's mission, its vision and its values. Timothy M. Dilg

Every year on the first day of school the St John Vianney faculty greet the young men and their parents with smiles, handshakes and donuts. The school employs 50 faculty and another 25 staff members.

Remember when you first dreamed of becoming a Catholic educational leader? Did you truthfully understand the enormity that someday you would be responsible for so many lives?

Each day hundreds and sometimes thousands of parents entrust their most precious asset, their children, to you. And what about the faculty, staff and community that you influence? Don't they frequently turn to you for leadership, knowledge, guidance and assistance? As a Catholic school leader you hold the lion's share of accountability for student safety, quality of instruction and community satisfaction as well as the usual executive oversight for efficient operations, financial stewardship, strategic initiatives, community relations and organizational culture. Catholic education in the 21st century demands that these items be essential cores to your mis-



St. John Vianney President Mike Loyet congratulates 2012 class valedictorian, Josh Giegling.

sion, because we are fortunate to serve humanity by forming the hearts, minds and souls of tomorrow's leaders.

So how can Catholic school leaders build a culture of excellence? I believe that excellence within a Catholic school

begins with school leadership. To create an excellent Catholic school, the leaders must be excellent themselves. They must not only believe in, but manifest in their actions, a passion for the school's mission, its vision and its values. Assuming a deep commitment to the school's mission and alignment with the desired values exists in leadership, the next steps are to Find Faith and Seek Service, Invest in the Best, and Reinforce the Expectation of Excellence. Organization, education and administrative skills are important, too, but excellence depends on deep alignment around these three intangibles.

Find Faith and Seek Service

The primary focus of Catholic schools is to participate in the church's evangelizing mission of bringing the Gospel to the ends of the earth. More specifically, Catholic schools are places of evangelization for the young. To create a school of excellence, leaders

▼ Each year the school takes the entire school body and faculty to perform a day of service to the community, working at nearly 25 nonprofit organizations. Tasks range from mowing and repairing dilapidated cemetery grounds, demolition and clean-up of facilities, to working with underprivileged preschool children by playing and reading with them. This crew helped renovate Covenant House during the fourth annual Day of Service.



▲ The St. John Vianney High School Student Ambassadors are a select group of juniors and seniors whose main purpose is to positively promote the school. Ambassador responsibilities include conducting campus tours; making phone calls to current students, prospective students and alumni; assisting with mailings to prospective students; supporting recruiting efforts by modeling good citizenship; and assisting with high school nights, the speaker series, select community Masses and open house. The Ambassador Program is open to students who are active in both academic and co-curricular activities, possess leadership abilities and exhibit enthusiasm for being a Griffin. Selection is based on merit, application responses and faculty recommendations.



must place the responsibility of finding faith and seeking service at the top of their administrative agenda. It's not enough to teach students the faith; we must prepare our students to live that faith in practice. By the very nature of Catholic schools we already create a host of opportunities for students to learn and practice the Gospel values. While each school community is unique, these suggestions provide opportunities for schools to expand upon the mission of Catholic education.

Catholic schools traditionally require service hours and offer opportunities for school prayer and Mass. As a Catholic school leader, seek ways to expand upon the current practices in your school. Find opportunities for additional all-school and community Masses. Create opportunities for the faculty and staff to come together more frequently to celebrate the Eucharist. Add school-wide prayers like The Angelus or Rosary to enhance your Catholic identity and make faith

an integral part of the daily experience.

Explore avenues to grow the current service program. Consider having extracurricular groups commit a weekend afternoon to a service project, take your student body off-campus for a day of service, invite non-profit organizations in to speak to your students and educate them about their service to the community.

Finding time to celebrate our faith and seeking additional service opportunities will model to students and staff how to live and practice the Catholic faith; it will keep our schools uniquely Catholic, and will strengthen our world today and tomorrow.

Invest in the Best

Schools throughout the United States, regardless if they are suburban, urban, rural, private, public or charter, are all facing difficult budgetary decisions and restraints. Having served two Catholic schools whose budgets are driven by enrollment and fundraising,

my experience has been no different than any other Catholic educator across the country. The best financial allocation an educational leader can make is to invest in the best educators—teachers that magically empower students, build curriculum and drive your mission.

In Jim Collins' outstanding book, "Good to Great" (2001), he makes the point that getting "the right people on the bus" is the first step toward excellence and research has identified the classroom teacher as the number one factor influencing student achievement. An educational leader serious about raising reading scores, ACT scores, lowering the dropout rate, getting more students in to college or focusing on school improvement targets will make this investment in the best teachers a top priority. Great teachers make great schools possible.

There are multiple approaches a Catholic school leader can take to invest in the best.

Investing in master teachers with advanced degrees and several years of experience presents more significant economic implications than teachers lacking similar professional credentials. Identifying, recruiting and hiring experienced professionals also can be difficult and can create a hindrance if a leader allows it. However, Catholic educational leaders known for leading schools to excellence, some which have made dramatic turnarounds in the most difficult school settings, will verify that the return on investment in hiring the most qualified teachers is the most advisable budgetary expense a school leader can authorize.

Educators with advanced degrees and handfuls of experience are not the only option for investing in the best. Schools can benefit greatly by hiring young educators who have a passion for education. Their enthusiasm, youthful perspective on life and new, creative ideas can engage students and ignite or reignite entire faculties.

Dynamic, inspiring, masterful educators do not often fall in a leader's lap. An educational leader has to post teaching openings in as many avenues as possible. The Internet and social media like Facebook, Twitter, and Craigslist have made this easier and more cost affordable for school leaders. Most nearby colleges and universities will post school openings, notify their graduates of openings and will welcome Catholic schools to their career fairs. Requesting student-teachers from local universities is another free resource to increase the probability of hiring a dynamic young educator. Local newspapers, websites and state and national organizations are also prime areas to recruit qualified candidates. An educational leader serious about leading a school to excellence knows to cast a wide net. Keep in mind that those who are brought into an organization, over time, determine to a great extent what the organization will become.

An often overlooked aspect of investing in the best is the current faculty and staff that you lead. All Catholic schools leaders are blessed to have a core group of teachers in their building right now that are simply the very best in their profession. The best strat-

egy one can implement as a Catholic school leader seeking excellence is to invest in those teachers. Identify the best teachers and listen to their ideas, thoughts, dreams and even complaints.

The best teachers want the very best for students. Invest in them by providing opportunities for them to collaborate as a faculty, give them avenues to communicate with you as the school leader. They have the most exposure to students and families. They know the strengths and the deficiencies of your students better than you'll ever be able to decipher on your own. Afford them the opportunity to share that valuable information with you. They know what needs to be implemented to increase student achievement in your building; they have terrific ideas to prevent bullying; they've considered techniques to increase parental involvement; they are up-to-date on the newest technology, they have innovative curriculum ideas; and they are the heartbeat and pulse of your school. Invest in their professional development. Give them the resources they need to be effective. Teach them, coach them and inspire them.

New programs, tools and manipulatives appear on the market daily. It is easy for any educational leader to reach for that magic bullet to transform a school overnight. Having tried many of those transformative toys, I've come to understand what the best educators have known for many years: It's not programs; it's people who make the difference. An educational leader serious about moving a school from good to great invests in the best educators and leaves the latest trend of the month on the shelf. The investment in qualified educators pays off far more than any curriculum in a box ever will.

Reinforce the Expectation of Excellence

The final component to creating a school of excellence is to immerse the expectations of excellence into everything that is done within the school. Every discussion, email, document and process is an opportunity to support your expectations of excellence. When test scores soar or students go out of their way to help those in need, how will you celebrate?

As leaders we often assume everyone will do their best and exceed expectations at all times, but how often do we recognize and applaud that effort? Take time at faculty meetings to praise and reinforce the work of the teachers who are putting in extra hours to prepare for homecoming, Christmas Mass or graduation. Honor your students over morning announcements or in your monthly newsletters for their academic, athletic and community service accomplishments.

Make excellence an expectation and a daily norm. Social media like Facebook and Twitter provide affordable avenues to acknowledge the culture of excellence you are building. Make it a goal every day to share one example of excellence taking place within your school. When your best teacher performs a masterful lesson, tweet about it! When the soccer team wins a district championship post a picture and congratulatory message on Facebook. When students exceed the expectations on the state or national exam, email their parents and post their accomplishments on your website. Find opportunities to stream your school Masses online. The possibilities of immersing your culture in excellence in the 21st century are endless and typically free.

Regardless of your current school conditions, it is possible to lead for excellence. It requires a commitment to a strong Catholic mission to educate students for spiritual, academic and personal excellence, hiring exceptional staff with high standards and immersing the school community with daily examples of excellence. Then, the overwhelming pride from being part of something great comes. Your heart will pound with excitement when you realize that your school community is working to the beat of one heart and one mission to lead your school to excellence.

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