

SCHOOL PROFILE

Managing Governance Change in PreK-12 Catholic Schools

Archdiocese of Camden

St. Joseph Pro Cathedral School, Catholic Partnership Schools

Through its mission to support a vital Catholic Church, FADICA strives to catalyze positive change for Catholic schools. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, an average of 120 Catholic schools closed each year. The pandemic led to the closure of more than 200 Catholic schools prior to the fall of 2020.

About 80% of America's Catholic schools are elementary schools. The majority of these schools remain closely linked to a parish community through the "parochial" model for Catholic schools established by the bishops in the late 1800's. The basic tenets of this model – the financial support of the parish and the leadership of the parish pastor – have become scarce resources in the 21st century.

Recognizing that alternative structures for governing Catholic schools are essential for sustainability, FADICA partnered with national leaders in Catholic education to explore evidence-based best practices for Catholic school governance. FADICA's 2020 report, *Managing Governance Change in PreK-12 Catholic Schools* studies innovative governance models in eight dioceses across the country. This narrative provides one example of a Catholic school that has experienced increased stability following the adoption of one of these models.

Improved outcomes for inner-city schools

When St. Joseph School was established in the late 1800's by the Franciscan Sisters of Syracuse, the city of Camden, New Jersey was on the verge of becoming a hub of industry and growth. Located across the Delaware River from the bustling city of Philadelphia, Camden was the home to the one of the largest shipbuilding companies in the world, which employed 30,000 residents to build ships for World War I and II.

Additional Catholic parish schools were opened to minister to the growing population, including Sacred Heart School in 1920, and in 1927, Holy Name and St. Cecilia Schools. By 1956, St. Joseph parish had grown to serve 4,300 families, with a school enrollment of 1,125 students and a teaching staff of 20 Sisters of St. Francis.

Unfortunately, the post-war years were devastating for Camden. The closing of the shipyard prompted droves of residents to leave the city for the suburbs. The city's loss of industry was followed by political corruption, civil unrest, increased crime, and increased poverty.

In the early 2000's, the Diocese of Camden began a process of evaluating Catholic schools for consolidation and regionalization, which allowed for broader support from more parishes. However, this solution was not applicable to the urban Catholic schools in the city of Camden where parishes were financially strained and families lacked the resources for tuition.

Two charismatic pastors of urban parishes, Monsignor Michael Doyle of Sacred Heart parish, and Monsignor Bob McDermott of St. Joseph Pro-Cathedral parish, had dedicated their ministry to the social and spiritual welfare of the Camden community. When low enrollment and increasing costs prompted the diocese to consider closing the urban Catholic schools, they voiced the concern, "what happens to our students when our schools are gone?"

That concern was shared by Robert Healey and his daughter, Christine. They had established the Healey Education Foundation with a mission to sustain Catholic education by equipping dioceses and schools with a dynamic business model. Their goal was to empower schools to help themselves by funding and training staff to manage enrollment and fundraising in each school, as well as transitioning to a new governance structure.



“But in inner-city Camden – one of the most impoverished and violent communities in the US – each Catholic school could not pull themselves up by their bootstraps,” shared Christine Healey, “so we created a separate school management operation to run the five schools.”

A system for urban Catholic schools

Through a negotiated agreement with the Diocese of Camden, the Healey Education Foundation formed the Catholic Partnership Schools (CPS) in 2008 based on extensive research and analysis about how best to retain Catholic education’s cultural and academic strengths, and best practices.

Five once-separate, and parish-based elementary schools are now administered by a single non-profit entity that centralizes financial, academic and operational management and oversight. In 2020, the Saint Anthony of Padua School became the Community Learning Campus at St. Anthony, offering dual-language Catholic education for preschoolers. The other four schools, Sacred Heart, Holy Name, St. Cecilia, and St. Joseph Pro-Cathedral, continue to serve students in grades K-8 and their local communities through intentional relationships fostered by each principal and pastor.

St. Joseph Pro-Cathedral principal, Kyle Orosz, recognizes the benefits of maintaining the local parish relationships. “The parish community still feels connected to the school,” shared Orosz. She added that since the tasks of managing the business of the school are no longer on the shoulders of the pastors, the model “allows priests to be pastors and relate to the school communities.”

Father Ed Friel is one of the pastors who has witnessed the impact of this alternate approach for managing Catholic schools. As pastor of Mary Queen of All Saints, a consolidated parish formed from St. Veronica’s and St. Cecilia’s, Friel has served on the board of CPS for three years. “St. Cecilia’s School would have had to close if it were not for CPS,” shared Friel, emphasizing the strain that the schools had placed on the parish finances.

Although the centralized business model has relieved the financial stress felt by the parishes, some of the changes in decision-making authority were met with resistance. “There were various levels of skepticism among the

pastors,” admitted Healey. “They had to be convinced, to feel comfortable with relinquishing control.”

Rev. Friel stressed the importance of clear communication about the changes in school operations and governance. “It’s helpful to explain to pastors that this is a different option than leasing your school building to a charter school,” explained Friel. He added that many pastors are leery of changes that may leave them disconnected from the school and relegated to the role of a lease-holder. “It’s important to maintain a connection with the pastors.”

“Relationships are so important,” Healey agreed. “We need to have open-minded and willing people for the collaboration to be successful.”

Leadership and Governance

The governance structure developed by the Catholic Partnership Schools is categorized as “central-collegial,” which is defined in the FADICA report as a “group of schools governed partially or fully by a board.” The Healey Education Foundation encourages all of their partner schools to implement a “board of specified jurisdiction,” which is defined as a governing body with the authority to make final decisions related to a limited set of issues, while the remaining issues rest with the executive leader, pastor, or bishop.

In the case of the Catholic Partnership Schools, the bishop of the Diocese of Camden maintains reserved powers for issues related to the school’s property, Catholic identity, and the confirmation of board members and the school principal, with some decision-making shared with the pastor.

The board of specified jurisdiction has final authority over the finances, strategy, enrollment, and fundraising initiatives as well as support and oversight for the pastor and principal, who also serve as board members. As chief administrator, the principal for each school is charged with the oversight of all school personnel, academic curriculum, and the implementation of policies and strategies as determined by the board.

The central office for the Catholic Partnership Schools is staffed by an executive director who is accountable to the diocesan superintendent and reports to the board. The

executive director leads a team of eight professionals focused on development, enrollment, academics, finances, marketing, and support services for families and students.

The 21-member CPS board is guided by Christine Healey as board chair, includes the CPS executive director and the diocesan superintendent of Catholic schools as members. According to Orosz, CPS has a “very generous, collaborative relationship” with the diocese, which was especially helpful when schools needed to mitigate the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The support from the board has also been critical to managing the pandemic. Orosz remarked that the board understands “that we have problems that are different from other schools.” This was demonstrated by the board’s decision to recommend a grant to support placing a mental health counselor in every school when the students returned to in-person learning.

Rev. Friel shared, “The people on the board are very committed, and we have a very dedicated staff that work hard to help our families and students.”

Finances

Tuition revenue is only a minimal contributor to the revenue of the CPS system, with the average contribution per family at about \$900 a year. The total cost to educate each student is about \$6,000 per year. With no financial support provided through the parishes, and minimal funds through the diocese, the model relies heavily on grants and charitable contributions, which account for \$4.8 million of the \$5.8 million budget.

When pandemic relief funding became available through the CARES act, the Healey Education Foundation helped Catholic Partnership Schools apply within a week of the act being signed into law. CPS received \$1.2 million as one of the earliest applicants for Payroll Protection Program funds.



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**– Christine Healey, President
Healey Education Foundation**

Mission fulfillment

CPS schools have been successfully helping Camden’s children learn for nearly 100 years, and they achieve some of the best educational results in the city of Camden, including:

- 85% of CPS eighth graders are proficient or advanced in reading, compared with 32% of Camden public school students.
- 40% of graduates go on to Catholic or private high schools, and 96% of these graduates go on to colleges.
- Schools have a 96% student average attendance rate.

At St. Joseph Pro-Cathedral, Orosz said she was pleased with how the students at her school benefit from sharing the centralized services and extra-curricular activities with the rest of the CPS schools. “We are all CPS Angels,” Orosz explained. “We share the same sports teams, orchestra, and even Lego Robotics teams.” The school also offers student support services with programs before and after school, breakfast and lunch programs, as well as programs supporting dual-language and English as a Second Language.

Rev. Friel noted that the schools have experienced a significant increase in Hispanic students, which have enriched the parish with their participation in the

sacraments and weekly mass attendance. He commends the staff at the schools for their dedication. “Even after the parishes merged, the schools were still there. Some of the staff at St. Cecilia’s have been there for 37 years,” shared Friel. “We have some very involved teachers who are committed to Catholic education.”

Orosz is one of those dedicated educators. “I chose to teach in urban education,” she shared. “I wanted to give my students in Camden the same experience that children have in more affluent neighborhoods.”

When the students were able to return to in-person classes in 2021, Rev. Friel shared how he observed their excitement despite the face masks that covered half of their faces. He asked a fifth grade girl how it felt to be back at school. To his surprise she responded, “My eyes are so tired!” Quizzically, Friel asked, “Why are your eyes so tired?” The girl responded, “From smiling all day with my mask on!”

“Education never stopped in our Catholic schools,” said Friel. “The teachers and staff have done the best they could to keep education consistent despite all the changes.”

Best practices in action

As part of the system of Catholic Partnership Schools, St. Joseph Pro-Cathedral has benefited from the ability to share resources with other schools, while also maintaining its own identity and relationships with its legacy parish and pastor. The central-collegial type of governance provides the opportunity for the educators to truly focus on teaching and caring for the students, without the additional responsibilities of managing budgets, enrollment and fundraising.

Evidence supports the likelihood that none of the schools in CPS would have been able to remain open without the establishment of this system. The FADICA report noted that one of the factors when considering the need for a change in school governance was the consideration of “socio-economic justice,” and listed one of the best practices as emphasizing “mission over money.” While some cost-savings may be realized through a change in governance that leads to increased collaboration and shared services among multiple schools, the report cautioned school leaders against using a cost-saving goal as the primary motivation for governance change. School



Catholic Partnership Schools

School Management Organization

- System of 5 schools

Central-Collegial Governance

- Board of Specified Jurisdiction

and church leaders should instead focus on how a change in governance could provide a better Catholic education than the current reality. This has certainly occurred through the CPS, as students have increased access to more opportunities while thriving academically in their small school setting with affordable tuition.

Another important best practice that was highlighted in the report was “consider the role of the pastor.” Since CPS was able to sustain the schools with a central business office without the need to merge or consolidate schools with other parish schools, the students, families, and pastors benefit from a continued relationship through their local parish. Pastors have the ability to focus primarily on their pastoral responsibilities and enjoy their in-school interactions with students and families without the added stress and worry about how to financially sustain the school.

The success of a governance model relies heavily on many other components that lead to excellence in Catholic schools. “Strong leadership, committed principals, mission-driven teachers, and data-informed decisions,” are some of the factors that Healey has highlighted as keys to a school’s success. For the youth in inner-city Camden, CPS provides hope for a promising future. ❄️❄️❄️

This profile was produced as a complement to FADICA’s report, *Managing Governance Change in PreK-12 Catholic Schools*, which may be accessed at: www.fadica.org.



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