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Sowing the NSBECS: Professional Development Approaches For Sustained Catholic School Change

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*We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an
opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. (Untener, 1979)*

Last month, the president of a Catholic high school called looking for a promising innovation in education to counter the failing trajectory of his school. He had been at the school for less than a year and signs of trouble were becoming more visible each month. “Is there something we can launch to excite families and boost enrollment?” After detailing the landscape of his school with me, he knew the answer to his own question. Sighing, he said, “I just need more runway to make things work.”

All Catholic schools face difficulties of one kind or another, some self-made, some inherited. The rise and fall of new school models over the past 15 years remind us that there are no silver bullets to mend these challenges. Instead there are seeds, carefully selected and properly placed, tended and tethered as seedlings, taking root and transforming the landscape around us. Sowers toil together, transforming seeds into life-giving harvest. In Catholic schools, the community sows the seeds of change, and the many hands that help need shared knowledge and guidance to complete the task. Sowers of change have found this guidance in the National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Schools (NSBECS) (Ozar & Weitzel-O’Neil, 2012).

This article highlights two professional development programs that depend on the NSBECS to sow change: the Emmaus Leadership Series and the Two-way Immersion Network for Catholic Schools (TWIN-CS)—signature programs of Boston College’s Roche Center for Catholic Education. Provided is a brief description of the programs and their use of the NSBECS followed by a discussion of what I have observed from this work and what value these lessons have for others responsible for successful Catholic schools.

Both the Emmaus Series and TWIN-CS began in 2012, in the months following the publication of the NSBECS. From inception, these programs have depended on the NSBECS to articulate an effective Catholic school. Overtime, this commitment to the NSBECS has made an impact on the programs' success by helping educators to (a) individually customize their processes for improvement and (b) collectively align their approaches with others who are moving through the same changes.

Professional Development Programs for Steady Change

The Emmaus Series is a 20-month professional development program offering school leaders executive-level training on Catholic school improvement. Participants strengthen their knowledge of systems thinking, spiritual leadership, curriculum and instruction, and operational vitality at the intersection of Catholic theology, educational research, and professional practice. Leaders' growth is enriched through the cohort design of the Emmaus Series (Williamson, Melley, Reynoso, & Placke, 2019). They bring their local challenges to a national conversation on leading excellent schools. Through the program, Emmaus Series participants identify the strategies, resources, and support they need to lead change.

The Two-Way Immersion Network for Catholic Schools (TWIN-CS) guides teams of school-level educators through processes of designing, developing, and operating whole-school dual-language immersion models. Launched in 2012 with 11 pioneering schools, TWIN-CS has grown to 20 schools representing 16 dioceses in 12 states. These schools have barked the falling enrollment trends of their respective dioceses, showing an average 49% increase compared to an average -9% decline (see Figure 1). TWIN-CS is recognized as one of the most innovative and important initiatives in US Catholic education (Winters, 2017).

Time is invested at the outset of both programs to explain the purpose, design, and utility of the NSBECS. While this context is important, it is the repeat invitation and exposure within the programs that allow participants to discover the true merit of the NSBECS. The density of the document becomes navigable as educators return again and again to the Standards and Benchmarks to diagnose and remedy challenges at their schools. While the programs have different goals, both TWIN-CS and the Emmaus Series utilize the NSBECS as a framework to support leaders sowing systemic change.

Many Needs, Many Approaches

The NSBECS offer educators participating in Roche Center programs a flexible approach to local school improvement efforts. Each summer, the Emmaus Series welcomes a new cohort of 25 Catholic school leaders to begin a 20-month partnership with the Roche Center and with one another. It is a diverse group. They carry different school administrative titles (e.g. head of school, president, principal, assistant principal), represent a variety of pathways into the profession, and are searching for effective approaches to overcome all sorts of difficult school-based struggles. Here, in their own words, are some of the challenges they bring to the Emmaus Series:

- There is not enough expertise guiding the management of the school
- We are preparing students for the last decade
- Teachers' expectations for student excellence is inconsistent within and across grade levels
- Teachers are underpaid and over extended
- School alumni are not involved in the life of the school
- Our tuition model is a poor fit for our student population

Through a series of reflections and group conversations, leaders begin to explore their problems within the framework of the NSBECS. We ask: With which Standard does the problem most closely align? What resources and understandings are represented in the Benchmarks associated with that Standard? What is the vitality of these Benchmarks in your school? Over the next 20 months, participants learn a common methodology of change as they work to bring their particular challenges into alignment with the NSBECS. Workshops, retreats, and webinars sustain the work and the companionship essential for leading change in Catholic schools.

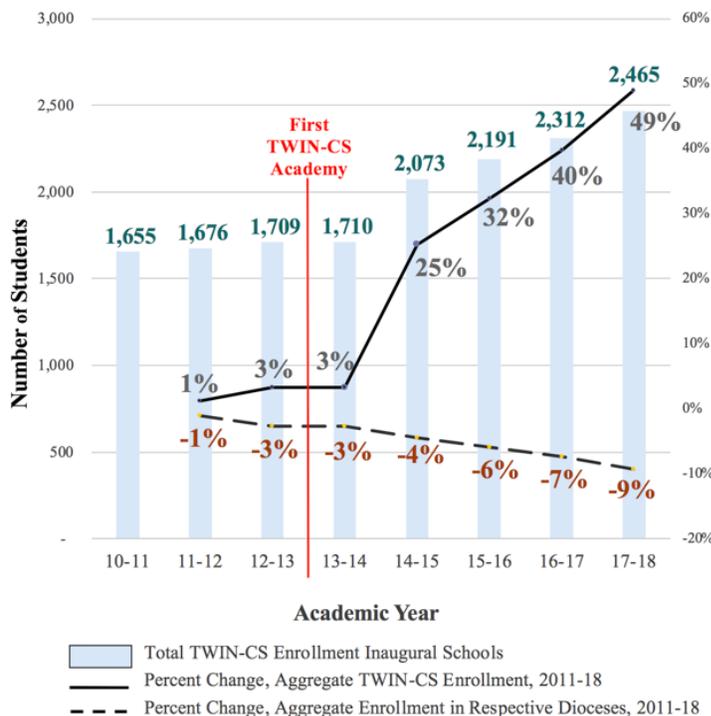
Common Need, Common Approach

Catholic schools joining TWIN-CS bring one shared (and huge) challenge—their need to transform into a culturally and linguistically responsive community offering whole-school dual language instruction. Much like the Emmaus Series, TWIN-CS educators are repeatedly exposed to the NSBECS as an essential framework to guide the process of change. However, unlike the Emmaus Series where the NSBECS support multiple approaches to change, TWIN-CS depends on the NSBECS to codify a process of transformation to be shared across the network of Catholic schools.

Each year, four to five new schools join the network. Together, they start at the beginning, domain one of the NSBECS, thoughtfully engaging with

the mission and Catholic identity of their schools. We ask, what is the purpose of your school? And, who do you serve? This begins a critical review process in which they compare their schools' existing resources and priorities with those that are needed to support the transformation. Fortunately for these newer schools, the way forward has been well trod.

Today, TWIN-CS is anchored by Catholic school educators with six plus years of experience as change agents, trained in dual language and the NSBECS. Carefully designed platforms for professional learning and collaboration harness this knowledge from which others in the network learn. As schools progress little by little into multilingual schools, those further along in their transformation provide insights to those at an earlier stage. Novice schools readily find savvy thought partners to support their work with the NSBECS. TWIN-CS benefits from the NSBECS, helping schools define and follow a shared, rigorous path of transformation. The harvest of this sowing is abundantly evident in the aggregate enrollment data of the original schools (see Figure 1 below).



Lessons for the Future

The NSBECS facilitate a gradual and steady approach toward excellence, providing schools more “runway” for change. Professional development programs that use the NSBECS framework can help leaders a.) customize an approach that responds to the particular resources and limitations of their own schools and b.) share in a process of professional learning and transformation. These opportunities are of great importance, for in the past few decades, the disparity of resources between Catholic schools has contributed to an increasing fragmentation within dioceses and networks. As the Emmaus Series and TWIN-CS demonstrate, the NSBECS can facilitate both customization and collaboration, suggesting the possibility of unity and mutuality at a time when the future of US Catholic schooling has never been more uncertain.

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