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Defining Inclusionary Practices in Catholic Schools

Sean J. Smith¹, Gregory A. Cheatham² and Jennifer M. Amilvia³

Abstract: The purpose of this article is to provide Catholic educators, administrators, families, and broader parish communities an understanding of critical elements required to effectively include all students, particularly those with disabilities, in Catholic schools. With an understanding that Catholic schools enroll and will continue to add not only students with disabilities, but also other students who may struggle with learning in some manner, the Catholic school community needs to keep abreast of effective practices that facilitate meaningful inclusion. This is especially relevant for those Catholic families who desire a Catholic education for their children with disabilities, as well as their typically developing children. This article seeks to: (a) offer a rationale for the need to include all learners in our Catholic schools through the reinforcement of Catechetical teachings, (b) define inclusion in Catholic education, (c) outline characteristics of high quality, inclusive schools, (d) review relevant research on inclusion that is applicable to the needs of our Catholic school environments, and (e) provide a case study of an effective, inclusive Catholic school to further contextualize to the field what is not only possible, even given limited resources, but what is happening in today's Catholic school settings.

Keywords: Inclusion, disabilities, effective practices

Since the Second Vatican Council and the promulgation of The Declaration on Christian Education (*Gravissimum Educationis*; Paul VI, 1965), there have been numerous documents written by both the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, as well as local episcopal conferences addressing the mission, purpose, importance, and essential elements of Catholic schools in serving the salvific mission of the Church. One theme present in many of these

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works is that of the communal nature of Catholic schools and its necessity in fulfilling this mission. In *The Catholic School*, the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education states:

It is recognized that the proper place for catechesis is the family helped by other Christian communities, especially the local parish. But the importance and need for catechetical instruction in Catholic schools cannot be sufficiently emphasized. Here young people are helped to grow towards maturity in faith. (1977, p. 51)

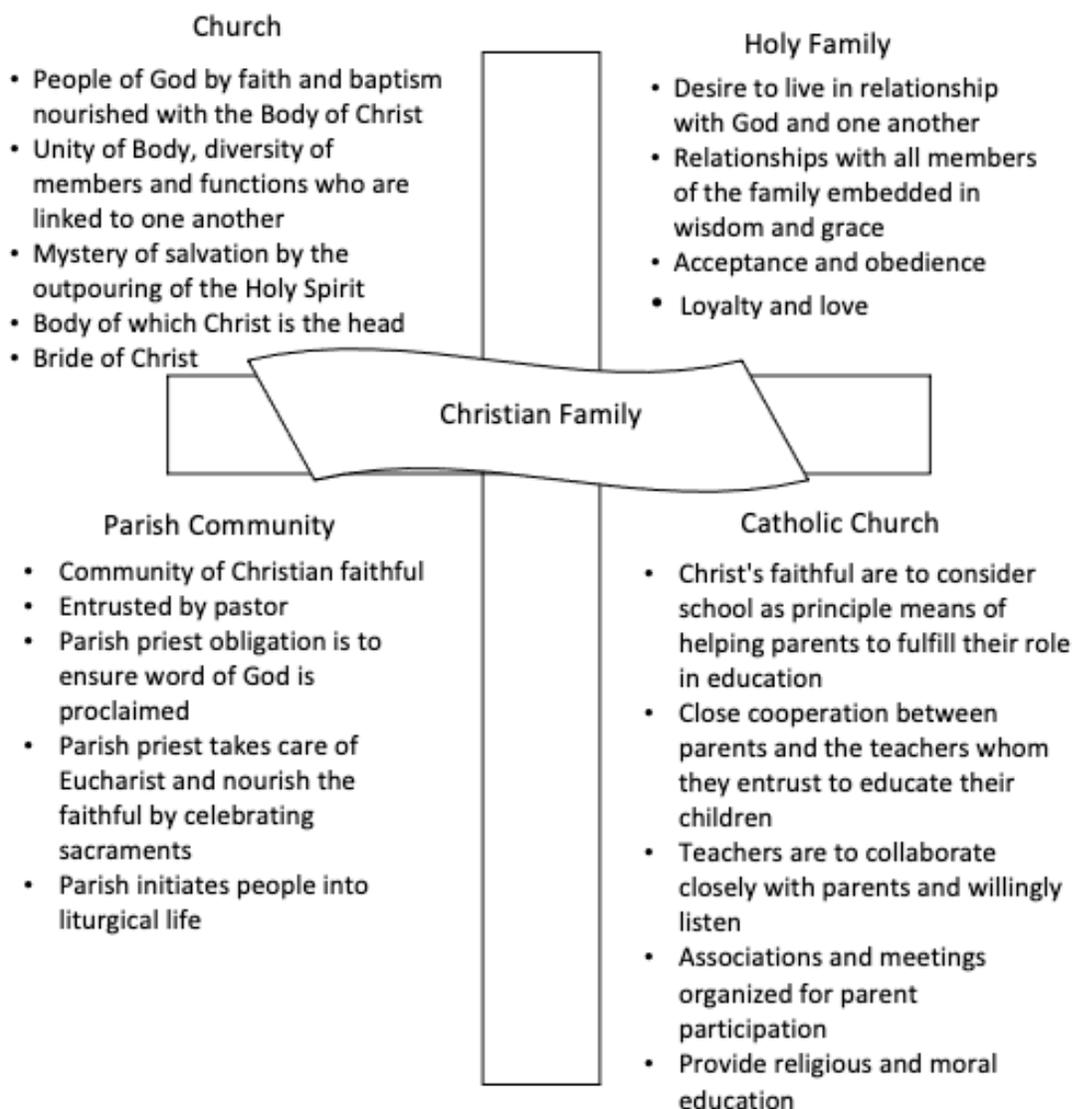
In this article, we argue that Catholic schools should be more cognizant of providing services for all children, thus, including all Catholic families and their respective children, regardless of disability. By doing so, Catholic schools will better answer the call to assist families with the catechesis and formation of all of their children (those with and without special circumstances) in a Christian community.

The purpose of this article then is to provide Catholic K-12 educators, administrators, families, and broader parish communities with an understanding of the critical elements to implement effective, inclusive schools and classrooms for all students, particularly those with disabilities. More specifically, we (a) offer a rationale for the need to include all learners in our Catholic schools through the lens of Catechetical teachings and the foundational element that, the Catholic family serves for the Church, (b) define inclusion, (c) outline characteristics of high quality, inclusive schools, (d) review relevant research regarding inclusion that is applicable to the needs of our Catholic schools, and (e) provide a case study of an effective, inclusive Catholic school to illustrate what is not only possible, but what actually is happening in certain Catholic schools today.

Key Functions of Catholic Families and Schools

To gain perspective of the Christian family's role, we need to evaluate the evidence provided to us from the Catechism of the Catholic Church (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 1997) and the Code of Canon Law ((Canon Law Society of America & Catholic Church, 1983). The Catechism of the Catholic Church and the Code of Canon Law emphasize four elements that contribute to the growth and sustainment of the Christian family (see Figure 1). The four parts include the Church, the Holy Family, parish communities, and Catholic schools. The Church is a religious institution where God assembles His people from all ends of the earth (USCCB, 1997). God is "calling together" communities of believers by faith and baptism to be nourished with the Body of Christ. From the unity of the body, the Church brings together diverse members who then become linked to one another through the sacraments. The Church provides families with the freedom to profess one's faith, pass it on, and raise one's child within the institution.

The second element that contributes to the growth and sustainment of the Christian family is the Holy Family, a model which Christian families seek to emulate (see Figure 1). For example, one quality of the Holy Family is acceptance of individual differences that may not be perceived

Figure 1*Christian Family Core of Church*

Note. The Christian Family is placed in the center to represent the significant role families play in their child's lives. The four quadrants illustrate the roles each play in supporting the family. Content adapted from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1997).

as ideal. This can be seen in the immaculate conception of Jesus. When the Angel Gabriel visited Mary and blessed her with the life of God's only Son, Mary accepted the gift of life and the role of mother with grace and love. Just as Mary and Joseph accepted that their son was greater than they could explain, we need to accept the differences of all individuals in our families. In addition, the Holy Family was obedient to the word of God. As models of faith, Mary and Joseph confronted and embraced whatever challenge before them with unconditional trust in God. Thus, the love that the Holy Family experienced from God enabled them to love, trust, accept one another.

The third element contributing to the family, the parish community, is a community built of Christian faithful (USCCB, 1997, section 2179). The function of the parish is to help sustain the family's function (see Figure 1). Led by a priest, the parish community is a place where the word of God is proclaimed the Eucharist is celebrated (USCCB, 1997, section 2179) and all Catholic families come together to grow, serve, and further develop as a Catholic community. The family receives support of the parish community via the liturgy, sacraments, and other forms of prayer, catechesis and education in the faith through the Catechism.

With respect to catechesis and education, one of the most important ways the parish supports families is through the Catholic school. Catholic schools are considered the principle means of helping families to fulfill their role in educating their child (see Figure 1). Schools are expected to have close cooperation between families and teachers who educate their children. Specifically, teachers are to collaborate closely with parents and listen to the family's priorities and concerns about their child's strengths and needs. Thus, if schools are to assist families in the religious and moral education of their children, schools need to ensure that All families can participate in the school.

The Church as an Inclusive Community

Despite the call of our parishes and schools to assist all families, actual practices in parishes often result in limited success in providing this support (Blackwell & Robinson, 2017). For the purposes of this article, we will focus on the Church's inability to include All family members in Catholic schools. While there are pockets of success, Catholic school efforts through the majority of the 20th Century and continuing into the 21st Century contain far too many examples of exclusion of family members who are neither allowed to meaningfully attend their parish school (Center for Research in the Apostolate, 2016). Unfortunately, the inclusion of certain siblings and the exclusion of others is part of the collective Catholic school history in the United States (Burke & Griffin, 2016).

To be clear, efforts to include students with disabilities in Catholic schools have been underway since the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (now reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004). Catholic schools have explored options for increasing the number of quality services available for children with disabilities and

their families (Burke & Griffin, 2016). Across the United States, Diocesan wide efforts as well as individual parish efforts have worked to develop inclusionary service delivery models that address both the moral responsibilities set forth by Catholic social teaching and the legal responsibilities established under IDEA (Long & Schuttloffel, 2006).

Efforts to include students with disabilities in Catholic education has led to the development of national grass root entities like the National Catholic Board on Full Inclusion (see <https://fullinclusionforcatholicschools.org/>). These efforts have sought to spotlight the need for inclusion while highlighting Catholic schools that have developed inclusionary learning experiences in K-8 and/or 9-12 Catholic education. Recognition of the need to further inform and guide inclusionary efforts led to the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) scheduling an inaugural conference to focus on exceptional learners which was originally planned to follow their 2020 annual conference (subsequently canceled due to COVID 19).

Catholic education literature has contributed to the call for and provided solutions to inclusionary efforts. For example, Blackett (2001) provided a series of recommendations for Catholic school administrators to consider when working to implement special education services. Over the past two decades a number of articles have been published calling for more inclusionary efforts in Catholic education (Crowley & Wall, 2007; Long & Schuttloffel, 2006; Scanlan, 2009). We should note that the significant majority of these publications are not representative of original research where authors are providing specific evidence on the strategies and/or the impact of practices to further facilitate Catholic school inclusion. Instead, authors have highlighted a number of ideas, delivery options, and recommendations including but not limited to: (a) rationale for Catholic school inclusion (Long & Schuttloffel, 2006); (b) examples of success stories ((Laengle et al., 2013); (c) specific strategies, tools, and solutions to foster inclusionary environments in Catholic education (Boyle & Hernandez, 2017; Durow, 2013; Frey et al., 2000; Lawrence-Brown & Muschaweck, 2013; Scanlan, 2009); and (e) changes in legal requirements to further support Catholic schools need to consider including all learners (Blackwell & Robinson, 2017; DeFiore, 2006; Russo et al., 2000; Scanlan, 2009; Schweinbeck, 2001).

This literature and the growing examples of inclusionary efforts across the country offer hope for Catholic education. And yet, Catholic families with children with disabilities (e.g., Down syndrome, Autism Spectrum Disorder) have had to and continue to have to make hard choices about where they send all their children, disabled or non-disabled, for K-12 education. Do they send some of their children (i.e., typical developing) to their parish school and enroll their child with a disability in their local public school because their Catholic school has stated that it is not equipped to serve the child with a disability? Do they decide to keep the family together and enroll all the children in the public school where all children can be served? Historically, this is a decision Catholic families have had to make when one or more of their children has an identified disability (Burke &

Griffin, 2016). In these situations, rather than being supported by the Church as described in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, families have been hindered because their level of participation in the Church has been limited by factors outside of their control. Separating family members (e.g., accepting some and excluding other children) goes against the primary teachings of Christ and thus, needs to be addressed in our actions as a Church and as a Christian community that proclaims, ALL Are Welcome.

Defining Meaningful Inclusion

Before focusing specifically on including students with disabilities in Catholic schools, we must discuss school inclusion in general. What is inclusion, particularly for students with disabilities in our K-12 schools? One might expect that the federal law that mandates public education for all students with disabilities, the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) (2004), would offer a specific definition. However, IDEA (2004) does not define inclusion but rather offers the principle of the least restrictive environment (LRE) in which a continuum of special education services, supports, and placements are available to students with disabilities depending on their educational, behavioral, and social needs. Nonetheless, educators, policy makers, state and local educational agencies, and similar national and local entities assert that inclusion is the most appropriate educational approach for students with disabilities (H. R. Turnbull et al., 2007). Indeed, best practice in special education has moved beyond this legal-based definition of LRE to the concept of inclusive education, which rather than focusing only on student placement in general education classrooms with non-disabled peers, focuses on a "range [of options] from physical placement to meaningful participation and outcomes" (Kurth et al., 2017, p. 276). Inclusive schools not only are accessible to all students, but also these schools offer curricula and learning activities such that students with disabilities are full members of the general educational community (J. Kurth et al., 2017). As a result, students with disabilities are "valued, accepted, respected, involved and have the same life opportunities as people without disabilities" (Wehmeyer et al., 2017, p. 51).

Inclusion encompasses three key principles: access, participation, and supports (DEC/NAEYC, 2009). Access covers providing access to a wide range of learning opportunities, activities, settings, and environments. Access, which for example, can include the implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (i.e., an instructional framework to learning using multiple means of representation, means of engagement, and methods of expression) to removing physical and structural barriers to learning (Capp, 2017). Likewise, even if the environment (e.g., classroom) is well designed to provide students with disabilities access, educators must also promote students' full participation. This can be done, for example, through the provision of individualized education with non-disabled peers. Thus, all students belong and are engaged. Finally, supports form the foundation for high-quality inclusive education (Wehmeyer et al., 2017). Supports often take the

form of ongoing professional development to promote collaboration to ensure the implementation of high-quality inclusion.

When these three principles are put into practice, the result is a “classroom model in which students with and without disabilities are based in a regular structure and benefit from the shared ownership of general and special educators” (Kunc, 1992, as cited in Causton & Theoharis, 2014, p. 34). While IDEA does not offer a specific definition for inclusion, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), the United States Department of Education’s entity that is tasked with implementing IDEA, provides a description of inclusion for early childhood programs. Although focused on children 3 through 5 years old, this statement offers ideals and practical elements that can be viewed as a model classroom for students of any age:

Including children with disabilities in general early childhood programs together with their peers without disabilities; holding high expectations and intentionally promoting participation in all learning and social activities, facilitated by individualized accommodations; and using evidence-based services and supports to foster [children’s] development, friendships with peers, and sense of belonging (OSEP, 2015, p. 3).

Thus, for the purposes of this paper, we will utilize the OSEP statement while also looking to the increasing literature that frames inclusion to be more than a physical place but also curricula, materials, practices, and activities that meaningfully support students with disabilities within the general education learning experience (Mclesky et al., 2012).

Inclusion Requirements and Expectations

As the OSEP statement illustrates, the lack of a federal definition on inclusion should not indicate an expectation that students with disabilities are not to be educated with their typically developing peers. To the contrary, federal court cases, recent legislation, and a series of educational frameworks and corresponding federal and state policies reinforce an expectation of inclusion for all students with disabilities (Yell & Bateman, 2018).

Over the past three decades, a series of District, Circuit, and Supreme court cases clarified several issues regarding the education of students with disabilities, including the issues related to the meaning of least restrictive environment and appropriate education. Included in these decisions were parental rights in both public and private schools concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities through the clarification and expectation of a least restrictive environment (LRE), clarity on what is deemed an appropriate education, parental rights for both public and private school options, and cases further determining the role and expectation of the school in serving students with disabilities in the preK-12 setting (Yell & Bateman, 2018). For example, the US Supreme Court unanimous decision in *Endrew v. Douglas County* increased the education expectations for students with disabilities requiring schools to consider every child’s individual strengths and weaknesses

when developing an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The court stated that schools can no longer offer generic services or what would constitute a one-size fits all educational approach for students with disabilities. Instead, the court decision demanded an increased level of inclusion for students with disabilities (Yell & Bateman, 2018).

In addition to these court cases, recent federal legislation, like the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (2015), also promotes an expectation that students with disabilities will be increasingly served with their typically developing peers in an inclusive educational setting. Under ESSA, new student accountability reporting requires states and thus, school districts, to improve the results for all students. Historically, students with disabilities have not performed well on annual statewide assessments in comparison to their typically developing peers (Cosier et al., 2013). In fourth and eighth grade assessment data, students with disabilities lag behind their peers by more than 30 percentage points in both reading and math (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2015). Under ESSA, states are required to develop accountability plans for low-performing districts and schools or students, including students with disabilities, who are not progressing on annual statewide assessments or other specified accountability measures.

To further efforts to include all students, ESSA (2015) also requires the use of preventive frameworks like multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), to increase the integration of effective academic and behavioral practices for all students, including those with an identified disability. For example, when MTSS is utilized in a school, students' progress is routinely monitored and different instructional interventions are implemented based on the assessment results seeks to integrate evidence-based practice determined by student-level data (e.g., progress monitoring) (Briesch et al., 2020). Students with more severe and persistent needs may require more intensive evidence-based interventions. Research has shown that when MTSS is implemented with fidelity, not only is student achievement in reading and mathematics improved, but so, too, is student behavior (Choi et al., 2017; Collins et al., 2019).

PBIS establishes what behavior is expected of all students within the various social settings of the school and then explicitly teaches the skills needed to meet these expectations via a system that utilizes rewards to reinforce expected behavior and natural consequences to remedy unacceptable behavior. Research has shown that when PBIS is implemented with fidelity, schools experience a reduction of disciplinary infractions and aggressive behavior. In addition, research shows that students' emotional regulation and academic engagement is improved. The research also shows that school safety and teacher retention improves (Biliias-Lolis et al., 2017). PBIS, for instance, seeks to reduce disciplinary infractions and aggressive behavior and seeks improvements in students' emotional regulation, academic engagement and achievement, school safety, and teacher retention. As a framework, PBIS encourages positive expected social skills across settings and all individuals that are explicitly taught and modeled for all students.

The expectation that schools further include students with disabilities into the general education setting has been clearly established as a result of the legislative and judicial action, as well as the policy initiatives. In addition, implementation of the educational frameworks and practices and the research regarding these has provided schools with needed tools to respond to this expectation. By planning and designing assessment, instruction, and behavioral interventions for all learners, students are included regardless of student skill level (McCray et al., 2014). Not surprisingly, current inclusionary data indicates that these policies and practices are leading to an increase in the inclusion of students with disabilities.

Inclusion in Today's Schools

According to US Department of Education data, 95 percent of students with disabilities (6 to 21 years old) served under IDEA were educated in public, general education classrooms for at least some portion of the day: 63.1 percent of these students were educated in the general classroom for more than 80 percent of the school day; 18.3 percent spent between 40-79% in the general classroom; and 13% spent less than 40 percent of their school day in the general education classroom. Only 5.1 percent of students with disabilities (6 to 21 years old) were educated outside of the general classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

Students with disabilities ages 6-21 years old served in the public school general education setting increased from 47 percent in Fall 2000 to 63 percent in Fall 2017. This change is due to the percentage of students spending less of their time in pull out or segregated special education classes. For example, during the same period, the percentage of students who spent 40 to 79 percent of the school day inside general classes decreased from 30 to 18 percent. Instead, most of these students increased time in the classroom to over 80% of the school day. Overall, students with a variety of disabilities (including learning disabilities, speech and language impairments, and sensory disabilities) and health impairments spent at the very least 65 percent or more of their school day in the general education classroom, thus, reducing the dependence on pull-out or segregated services (US Department of Education, 2018).

Furthermore, 2016-2017 OSEP data indicated that more than two-thirds (71 percent) of students with disabilities graduated with a regular high school diploma and less than 10 percent received an alternate certificate of completion. The remaining students either dropped out or completed requirements under other local educational criteria. This 71 percent represents the largest percentage of students with disabilities graduating from high school, indicative of the growing success of education practices for students with disabilities (e.g., inclusion) taking place in today's K-12 environment. Table 1 illustrates the time 6 to 21 year old students diagnosed with specific high incidence disabilities spend in public, general education classrooms.

Inclusion in Catholic K-12 schools is uncertain (Burke & Griffin, 2016). The same 2016-2017 US Department of Education data previously referenced indicates that one percent of all students with disabilities were placed by their parents in regular private schools (as opposed to private schools primarily serving students with disabilities). Of these private schools, nearly 40% are Catholic and thus, a large percentage of students identified with disabilities being served in private schools would be served in Catholic K-12 schools. In addition, research indicates (Boyle & Hernandez, 2016) that a number of students eligible for special education services in the public schools are not seeking special education services when enrolled in Catholic Schools. In other words, these students are not part of the public school disability data, suggesting that even a larger number of students with disabilities are attending Catholic K-12 schools today. A recent 2019 national survey of more than half of all K-8 Catholic Schools found that these schools are increasingly serving a larger number of students eligible for special education services under IDEA. In some schools, nearly 20 percent of their student body has an identified disability typically eligible for an Individual Education Program (IEP) (Smith et al., 2019).

Table 1

Inclusion in US Public School General Education Setting Based on Disability Category

Category	% all students with disabilities (6-21 years)	Percentage of these students spending 80% or more of the school day in general education classroom
Specific learning disability	38.6	70.8
Speech or language impairment	16.8	87.0
Other health impairment	15.4	66.4
Autism	9.6	39.4
Intellectual disability	6.9	17.0
Emotional disturbance	5.5	47.2

Note. Adapted from U.S. Department of Education, 2018

While encouraging, these data show that Catholic schools have much more work to do with regard to inclusion if they are to fulfill their mission of assisting families in the education and formation of their children. With these considerations in mind, the continued call to include all our children, regardless of ability, into our Catholic Schools is paramount. Fortunately, practices, approaches, and proven interventions exist as illustrated by our peers in the public setting. To continue our efforts in the Catholic School setting, we need to expand Catholic school understanding of effective behavioral and instructional practices and work to further implement these across our K-12 Catholic Schools (Smith, Fagella-Luby, & Bonifiglio, 2019).

The purpose of the next section is to present critical elements needed to implement effective, inclusive schools and classrooms for all students, particularly those with disabilities. More specifically, we outline characteristics of inclusive schools, and provide a case study of a high quality, inclusive Catholic school.

Review of Inclusion Research

Characteristics of High-Quality Inclusive Schools

Hoppey & Mclesky (2014) outlined research-based characteristics for inclusive schools centering on (a) cultural and organizational qualities of schools, (b) collaborative and team oriented environments, and (c) quality of classroom instruction, including high-quality professional development to facilitate educator development and subsequent change. These themes are discussed in greater detail below.

Hoppey & Mclesky (2014) describe the culture of high-quality inclusive schools as having a unified vision that focuses on the culture of inclusive schools. This culture includes a unified vision, which emphasizes meeting the needs of all students regardless of ability and other factors (e.g., ethnicity, class) and consists of a commitment to inclusion and high expectations for all students. Additionally, the culture of high-quality inclusive schools requires administrator (e.g., school principal) commitment to inclusion and support for shared decision making among educators. In this way, school administrators enhance teacher capacity for transforming teaching and student learning within classrooms. Furthermore, the culture of high-quality inclusive schools requires administrators to distribute leadership and responsibilities to more school staff members.

Hoppey & Mclesky (2014) describe organizational structure in high-quality inclusive schools as one that is conducive to problem solving. Administrators and teachers collaborate to improve their schools. Educators are encouraged to question the status quo. Teachers develop meaningful accountability measures, for example, of student learning (e.g., universal screening tools, curriculum-based measures, observations), and use data to set goals and make informed instructional decisions. Traditional roles and schedules for general and special educators are transformed to meet the needs of all students. For example, special educators are assigned to specific classrooms and/or content areas rather than groups of students.

The second characteristic of high-quality inclusive schools described by Hoppey and McLesky, collaborative and team-oriented environments, is based on emerging research and what many practitioners experience. That is, a sole teacher gathering and integrating information from multiple disciplines (e.g., social-emotional, instruction, behavior) is typically insufficient to meet the varied diverse needs of the typical classroom (Zagona et al., 2017). Collaborative teaming is an expectation of growing frameworks (e.g., MTSS, PBIS) where general and special education teachers, aides, related service personnel, and other school-based professionals are seen as an

effective unit that together employ effective instruction for teaching all students in the general education setting (McCray et al., 2014). Research investigating inclusive education illustrates that teams effectively function when collaboration training and collaboration time for design, implementation, and evaluation of instruction is provided (Newton et al., 2014).

The third characteristic of high-quality inclusive schools, according to Hoppey & Mclesky (2014) is quality instruction for all students. High quality within a framework of clear learning goals and objectives for individual students is essential. Learning activities are based on students' readiness and include a variety of instructional styles (e.g., explicit instruction, whole group, small groups, peer tutoring, cooperative learning) and assessment techniques to allow students to demonstrate their knowledge. Central to many high quality inclusive schools is the adoption of a tier-based framework through the Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). Instead of reacting to the needs of struggling learners or their peers with disabilities with alternate instruction after assessment has indicated a breakdown in learning, these schools initially provide all students with effective evidence-based instruction (Zagona et al., 2017). One strategy inclusive schools use to determine appropriate initial instruction is the implementation of annual universal screening for all students. Annual universal screening for all students allows inclusive schools to not only determine the needs of students, but also determine where instructional and behavioral approaches have been successful. Likewise, through integrated instructional plans with flexible MTSS tiers, these schools are equipped to proactively address students' academic, behavioral, and social emotional needs (Choi et al., 2017). The emphasis with the tier-based framework is a school-wide approach to student support, including students with disabilities. Moreover, instead of relying on assigning students to specific teachers (e.g., students with disabilities assigned to special education teachers), all teachers, aides, support staff, volunteers, and professionals in the building community work as a team when they assess students and plan subsequent interventions (Hoppey & Mclesky, 2014).

When providing quality instruction, inclusive schools also seek to provide appropriate modifications and/or accommodations to instruction and assessment. Modifications typically include alterations to existing standards, such as shortening a test or simplifying a reading passage. Accommodations include alterations to how students learn, such as allowing more time to complete a test or using audio books for course readings. Likewise, these schools often look to completely redesign instruction, materials, and assessments to integrate universally designed approaches to meet the needs of both individual students, as well as the classroom as a whole. This proactive approach often reduces the need to further modify instruction and curriculum due to the proactive planning for diverse learning needs at the outset.

Critical to the ability of high-quality inclusive schools to provide quality instruction is the delivery of effective, learner-centered, professional development. The intent of such PD is to build teacher and school capacity to facilitate inclusive education. Research suggests this PD must be

collaborative, ongoing and organic to reflect the unique needs of the educators involved (Leko & Roberts, 2014). Similar to MTSS and other burgeoning practices, effective PD that builds inclusionary environments uses data to inform instruction with the goal of developing teachers into problem-solvers.

Beyond these three characteristics, effective inclusive schools also include equitable partnerships with parents/families (J. Kurth et al., 2017). IDEA (2004) emphasizes the need for parent participation in decision making about their children with disabilities. Contemporary research discusses "family-professional partnerships" in which a partnership can be defined as follows:

A relationship in which families (not just parents) and professionals agree to build on each other's expertise and resources, as appropriate, for the purpose of making and implementing decisions that will directly benefit students and indirectly benefit other family members and professionals (Turnbull et al., 2015, p. 7).

Partnerships are in contrast to traditional roles in which parents are simply recipients of educators' decisions about students. Partnerships for effective inclusion are built on, in part, effective communication, mutual respect, equality, and commitment (A. P. Turnbull et al., 2015).

Equitable family-professional partnerships, particularly for families from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds require not only what A. P. Turnbull et al. (2015) describe, but also require meaningful participation of families. These families' backgrounds are viewed by educators not as having deficits as having family, community, cultural, and linguistic strengths that can be built upon in the education of students with disabilities (e.g., supporting the use of students' home language while they also learn English). Moreover, creating equitable family partnerships requires communication that is clear, culturally appropriate, and facilitates meaningful dialogue (Cheatham & Lim-Mullins, 2018; Cheatham & Nyegenye, 2017).

As previously noted, research has shown that the implementation of high quality inclusive practices benefits both students with and without disabilities (Wehmeyer et al., 2017). However, it must be stressed that simply placing students with disabilities in general education settings is not sufficient to attain the positive results (J. A. Kurth et al., 2014). Instead, the quality of the settings, including the use of evidence based instructional practices and appropriate services, are necessary to yield positive results for both types of students. This finding is important for all schools, but also has particular implications for Catholic schools.

Inclusive Education in Catholic Schools: An Example

As indicated, effective inclusion requires planning, a change in school climate, extensive professional support, and changes in instructional practice to ensure success. To illustrate this in practice, we present a vignette of a Catholic school that has prioritized inclusive education and

these key elements. While a number of Catholic K-8 schools are attempting to include students with disabilities, Saint Peter and Paul (pseudonym) was identified because it is a high school. A very typical Catholic high school focused on college preparatory curriculum with the expectation that a significant majority of their graduates will attend two- or four-year colleges and universities. The type of learning environment that has often argued against the inclusion of students with disabilities due to lack of funding or capacity based on their school's mission. In offering them as an illustration through this vignette, the hope is to show that even within these high expectations, that effective professional support, the integration of instructional practices, and the evolution of an accepting school climate can lead to the successful inclusion of students with disabilities.

Typical Catholic High School

St. Peter and Paul High School (pseudonym), located in the southeast part of the United States, is in many ways, a typical Catholic High School. Central to its mission is cultivating spiritual growth animated by the teachings of Christ resulting in a graduate who is ethically mature and has personal integrity. Developing a caring graduate prepared to be an engaged citizen living the social teachings of the Church are central tenets. Like many Catholic high schools, academics are central at St. Peter and Paul. The significant majority of graduates attend two- or four-year colleges or universities. Thus, curriculum and related coursework aligns with college preparatory rigor. The academic expectation is the development of students who are strong problem-solvers, writers, communicators, and overall, students who are equipped to think within today's 21st century demands. Thus, the school considers itself a college preparatory high school. Furthermore, the broader Catholic community, including the families that attend St. Peter and Paul, see their school as an excellent academic institution developing future leaders instilled with Catholic teachings to navigate the complexities of life.

Another tenet of the school's philosophy is a belief that all students can learn to become productive citizens in society. The key term here is all. For St. Peter and Paul, educators are focused on providing a diversified curriculum to foster learning opportunities where all students can experience success. St. Peter and Paul's student population includes a significant proportion (19%) of students with an identified disability. Thus, 1 in 5 students attending this college preparatory high school have a defined disability requiring supports and services to ensure their success. We should note, this number does not include nonidentified students found in most public and Catholic high schools who often struggle with learning (e.g., attention, anxiety, learning) and yet, for reasons previously described, are not identified. Thus, the 19% actually represents a lower number of those truly struggling with a disability and thus, impacting their learning and overall outcomes. For our purposes though, we will concentrate on the 1 in 5, those identified with a disability.

Serving All Students Including the 1 in 5

A 1 in 5 ratio requires thoughtful planning. In the past, some would have suggested that additional funding to hire specialized staff to support this ratio would be necessary. This has not been the case at St. Peter and Paul. Instead, they have sought to serve all students through their primary staff. Course electives, open to all students, have been added to offer additional support in reading, organizational skills, and strategic learning. Consequently, content teachers facilitate instruction for all learners.

St. Peter and Paul's current iteration of inclusion began in 2015. At the time, the high school worked to include students with disabilities through a series of learning strategy courses, accommodation plans, and extended time for testing. Supported by a director and a learning strategies teacher, there were no clear protocols for admission or documented guidelines to facilitate the program. Instead, the program, if one can call it that, was a response to K-8 inclusionary efforts. Eighth grade graduates who were accustomed to inclusionary practices began requesting admission into high school, and St. Peter and Paul sought to provide some level of assistance to these students.

Lack of planning led to a limited program where success was often dependent upon the student. If basic accommodations and extended time were all that students required, they would most often graduate. If specific supports or explicit instruction were needed, students often failed and either voluntarily left or were counseled to find other, more suitable schools. Unsatisfied with these results, in August of 2015, St. Peter and Paul decided to examine effective practices and adopt purposeful strategies to offer a meaningful inclusionary program.

Effective Solutions to Facilitate Inclusion

The St. Peter and Paul Support Program began with data. Working with various stakeholders, building leadership engaged guidance counselors, teachers, the current academic support personnel, and external consultants to determine needs. They also looked to current research to identify best practices related to serving struggling learners and their peers with disabilities in an inclusive secondary environment.

It is important to state that a portion of the educators, students, and overall community members were not initially in agreement that St. Peter and Paul had the capacity to serve struggling learners and their peers with identified disabilities. Some believed that only students who met admission standards, succeeded without specialized supports, and completed all graduation requirements should be admitted and thus, served. A number of stakeholders believed that if students required additional accommodations or modifications, St. Peter and Paul was not the appropriate setting.

St. Peter and Paul leadership realized that in order to change the beliefs of these individuals, it would be important to show that the high-quality inclusionary practices described in the research

would benefit the needs of many of the school's current students (e.g., including those unidentified students). For example, social-emotional and behavioral needs were becoming increasingly at the forefront. Greater numbers of students reported that they were experiencing anxiety, and the student body as a whole expressed need for additional social-emotional support. Students also sought a safe and positive learning environment—one that addressed their individual needs and personalized instructional approaches. In addition, students were becoming aware that traditional lectures based on a set of required readings would not help them acquire skills needed in the 21st century setting. Students sought instruction that would better prepare them for this setting.

Once building leadership was able to show that best inclusionary practices aligned with the needs of the current student population, individual staff members were able to work with leadership and colleagues to create a vision for inclusion at St. Peter and Paul (see Figure 2). They realized many practices aligned with schoolwide needs. Creating a positive learning environment, making data-driven instructional decisions, and furthering family and school engagement, to name a few, were all practices St. Peter and Paul sought to integrate. They were also quality features for an effective inclusionary setting.

Beginning with a vision statement, see Figure 2, St. Peter and Paul began steps to develop an inclusionary environment for struggling learners and their peers with disabilities. Implementing the vision statement began with learning from effective practices. Understanding that high schools are different from K-8 schools, St. Peter and Paul looked to successful high school inclusionary efforts in order to identify what elements were successful and what additional interventions were needed. The school was particularly interested in identifying strategies that did not require significant financial investments. This review of existing successful efforts proved somewhat challenging as St. Peter and Paul leadership often heard from their peers about the expense believed to be required in order to develop a special education infrastructure.

Figure 2

St. Peter and Paul Vision Statement

St. Peter and Paul Academic Support Program is based on the recognition that each student is a unique individual created in the image of God. All students, regardless of their ability, will reach their full potential personally, spiritually, and academically. Students will be empowered to be responsible for their learning, become self-advocates and successful students.

Integrating Inclusionary Practices

Knowing additional funds were not available, staff determined that the plan to implement the schools' inclusionary vision would be a general education initiative. Staff focused on strategies and interventions that would maximize what took place in the general education classroom. One of the first initiatives began with building a team approach. For years, the St. Peter and Paul staff centered around the content they taught. For instance, science teachers worked with fellow science teachers. St. Peter and Paul sought to restructure teams so that educators planned across content areas, worked across grade levels, and focused these team efforts on individual students' needs. Becoming aware of student needs was at the forefront of many of these inclusionary efforts. Focusing on the student actually was a critical break-through for many of the teachers. When they reflected on who their students were and realized the variability in abilities that existed among the students, they understood how previous instructional, social-emotional, and behavioral efforts presented barriers to many students.

For example, the assumption that all students were reading at grade level or higher and were equipped with core writing skills became recognized as a myth. Though students appeared very capable, when staff reviewed academic data from the student body, vast differences in student strengths and weaknesses became evident. Working within the parameters of the general education classroom and the various graduation requirements, the staff focused their efforts on collaboration and maximizing what educators could do. Approaches like co-teaching, peer tutoring, peer coaching, and small group instruction were integrated across all grades. Technology tools to further individualize the learning experience were adopted, adding visual supports and multiple means to represent content, and further engaging student interest.

St. Peter and Paul also implemented solutions to support student development of students' executive functioning skills. Students were taught better organizational, notetaking, and time management skills. In addition, educators integrated instructional strategies to enhance student executive functioning.

While the focus was on the general education setting, St. Peter and Paul staff members also understood that if they were to meaningfully include students with specific disabilities, they would need to introduce intensive math and reading courses. Available to the entire student body as electives, these courses were required for some students to further develop their skills and support their ongoing development.

These efforts took place incrementally over three years. Each year had identified goals that prepared the school for the next stage of inclusion. Likewise, each year the staff examined whether current students' needs were still being met, while also admitting additional students with varying strengths and challenges and ensuring that all students belonged to and would succeed in the

secondary Catholic education experience. By the end of the 2015-2016 academic year, the school was meeting targeted goals for simply including students with disabilities in the building. As evidence of these efforts, the school had increased the number of students with disabilities to represent 17% of their grade 9-12 student body.

Schoolwide Efforts and Inclusionary Outcomes

The following year, enhanced their efforts. Simply providing access to their campus was not enough, instead, they sought to integrate effective practices to ensure meaningful inclusion where students were learning and meeting the academic expectations of the school. To do this, St. Peter and Paul implemented a co-teaching model where content experts teamed with professionals skilled to support struggling learners. Together they determined the levels of student needs, provided academic peer coaching support, and began to identify practices that might present barriers to students (e.g., exam procedures) and subsequently altered those practices ensure that quality instruction and evaluation was aligned with student needs.

During the 2017-2018 academic year, St. Peter and Paul implemented school-wide academic planners and required weekly communication between teachers and students enrolled in strategy classes (e.g., electives) to promote student engagement and responsibility for their own learning. In addition, teachers, working with guidance staff, implemented strategies to address with guidance staff, teachers sought additional strategies to address students on academic probation. Also, building staff implemented a schoolwide social skills program recommended by external consultants. This program was designed for certain students with identified social skill and social emotional challenges but also benefitted all students who increasingly face greater social emotional expectations in society.

Among the various instructional, behavioral, and social emotional practices integrated, another key component of St. Peter and Paul's ability to increase the number of students served with disabilities was high quality professional development. Content-based teachers sought ways to support their students, ways to further work with their colleagues across grades, roles, and expertise, and understand the diversity of their changing student body. An end of the 2017-2018, students with disabilities represented 18% of their student body. More important, an end of the year school wide survey found that the majority of teachers felt supported in their classroom and reported that accommodations and instructional practices were not difficult to implement, and overall, indicated an improvement in support to the meet the needs of ALL their learners in their content-based classroom. A promising note to the survey was that a significant majority of teachers sought more information about how to support their students, specifically students with anxiety disorders and challenging behaviors, which indicates an acceptance of these students and the need to further understand and serve them.

In summary, St. Peter and Paul, a typical Catholic high school in many ways (e.g., high academic expectations with a college preparatory program, focus on developing student leaders, integration of the teachings of the Church), offers an illustration of what is possible when a Catholic school integrates inclusionary practices via a schoolwide effort. Through co-teaching and professional collaboration, enhanced instructional programming, targeted coursework that provided effective instructional, behavioral, and social emotional development, the ongoing use of data-based decision making, and supportive professional learning opportunities for the entire St. Peter and Paul family, the inclusion of students with disabilities has risen and their success is being documented in retention and graduation.

The example is presented with the hope of showing what is possible when inclusionary practices are integrated in a schoolwide effort. Do challenges exist? Certainly. However, we hope the St. Peter and Paul experience will inspire more Catholic school educators to embrace and implement best inclusionary practices in their schools. Next steps in St. Peter and Paul's efforts in inclusive education include: (a) improved and consistent communication across the various school stakeholders (e.g., teachers, administration, parents/families); (b) further planning time to support co-teaching; (c) continued growth of academic electives that target student assistance (e.g., intensive reading elective); (d) development of additional peer support that engage all students to support student diversity; and (e) further infrastructure supports to facilitate students transitions into and out of St. Peter and Paul (e.g., summer orientation for incoming freshman, post-secondary transition efforts).

Final Considerations

The Catholic Church is an all-embracing Church including a variety of individuals across the world. Central to the Church is the family as illustrated to us by Christ and the original Holy Family. We do not divide the family or determine that some members are welcome and others are less so. Instead, our parish family seeks to put into practice the refrain, ALL are Welcome. However, as a Church, particularly through a portion of our Catholic School history, the inclusion of struggling family members or those with disabilities has been a challenge. Yet, in the 2020s, the inclusion of ALL learners, and thus, all family members, is not only necessary but also possible. Research identifies effective practices, frameworks, and interventions (Wehmeyer et al., 2017). Increasingly, Catholic Schools, like St. Peter and Paul High School, are integrating these proven practices illustrating what is possible for Catholic schools while also maintaining traditional high expectations. Catholic Schools are not being asked to independently develop inclusionary models. Catholic schools can look to years of research on effective inclusive schools. Inclusion should be a foundational element of who we are as Catholic educators so that we fulfill our mission of assisting parents in the education and formation of ALL their children. In this way, we truly welcome All and support ALL as a broader family of faith.

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