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## Practices, Perceptions, and Perspectives of Hispanic Catholic School Diocesan Leaders

*John Reyes<sup>1</sup>, Veronica Alonzo<sup>2</sup>, and Melodie Wyttenbach<sup>1</sup>*

**Abstract:** Centering on (a) the pathways and beliefs that characterize the experiences of Hispanic Catholic school diocesan leaders and (b) the impact of ethnic and cultural heritage on their leadership practices and perceptions, this article articulates the key findings of a qualitative descriptive study involving eight Hispanic Catholic school diocesan leaders in the United States. Drawing upon the four frames of understanding used in Ospino and Wyttenbach’s (2022) broad study on the 14,000 Hispanic Catholic school educators in the United States and existing literature on Hispanic superintendent leadership, the authors detail three key thematic findings in the areas of motivation, mentoring and support, and navigating pathways to leadership. The study’s findings suggest meaningful shifts in practice related to the recruitment and support of Hispanic Catholic school diocesan leaders as a means of increasing the inclusivity and responsiveness of Catholic school communities and systems.

**Keywords:** Catholic leaders, Latinx educators, professional development

Ospino’s (2022) *Cultivating Talent* study of the nearly 14,000 Hispanic Catholic school educators in the United States examined the state of affairs for Hispanic Catholic school educators through four frames of understanding: (a) the personal discernment shaping how Hispanics chose to enter into serving in Catholic schools, (b) their experiences of discernment and support within Catholic schools, (c) the pathways that lead Hispanics to serve within Catholic schools, and (d) how Hispanic educators use their unique positions within Catholic schools to serve the greater Church, the community, and the larger society. Although this broad study examined a

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representative sample of Hispanic Catholic school educators in general, we identified that the experiences and perspectives of Hispanic Catholic school diocesan leaders – superintendents, assistant or associate superintendents, or those with similar roles and responsibilities – were underrepresented within the study’s sample of individuals; their underrepresentation in that study’s sample was notable given that study’s distinct findings on the role of diocesan Catholic schools offices and their (potential) influence on the recruitment and retention of Hispanic Catholic school educators. The risk for marginalization is also amplified at the Catholic school diocesan level across the United States; there are 175 dioceses/diocesan Catholic school offices in the United States, presenting fewer opportunities for Hispanics to serve compared to the nearly 6,000 Catholic schools ([National Catholic Educational Association, n.d.](#)).

Drawing from the four frames of understanding used in [Ospino’s \(2022\)](#) broader study as well as the existing literature on the Catholic school superintendency, Hispanic superintendent leadership in U. S. K-12 schools, and Hispanic educational leadership, we executed a study in response to the broader *Cultivating Talent* study focused on these two research questions:

1. What are the pathways and beliefs that characterize the experiences of Hispanic Catholic school diocesan leaders?
2. How do their ethnic and cultural heritage impact their practice and perception of leading systems of Catholic schools?

This article details the findings of this study, first beginning with a review of relevant literature to ground the framing, analysis, methods and data collection used in this study. The findings from the data collected in this study are then detailed and analyzed within three major themes. The article concludes with a brief discussion of implications for practice and recommended areas for future research.

### **Review of Relevant Literature**

To better ground our inquiry and analysis of the narratives and perspectives on the pathway to Catholic school diocesan leadership for Hispanic Catholic school educators, we briefly review selected literature related to trends of representation within, and challenges facing, the Catholic school superintendency, examinations of the experiences of Hispanic public school superintendents, and profiles and characteristics of Hispanic educational leadership.

#### **Representation within and Challenges Facing Catholic School Superintendency**

In [Ospino and Weitzel-O’Neill’s \(2016\)](#) study on Hispanic students in Catholic schools, it was noted that approximately 10% of diocesan Catholic school office leaders identified as Hispanic. Four years later, [Nicdao’s \(2020\)](#) examination of the experiences of female assistant and associate

superintendents in Catholic schools revealed that of the 179 dioceses with Catholic schools offices, less than five dioceses had superintendents (or equivalent positions) held by non-White individuals. Her study of an increasingly minoritized group – that of female leaders of diocesan Catholic school systems – revealed notable constraints in the experiences of leadership in spaces led predominantly by men, opening up further potential inquiry on the difficulties and challenges faced by other minoritized groups in the Catholic school diocesan leadership space. [Cook, Fussell, and Simonds \(2021\)](#) studied the experiences of Catholic school superintendents who had left their positions and found that negative experiences and the crisis of faith perpetuated by those experiences led to a common phenomenon of early departure from their respective roles. Both studies spoke to the need for systemic change and reform in the training, support, and policies guiding the work of Catholic school superintendents, and in particular, a need to extend the work of [Cattaro and McDonald \(2015\)](#) on the stress factors that contribute to negative trends in recruiting and retaining Catholic school superintendents.

### **Latinx/Hispanic Superintendents**

The literature on the trends of representation and recruitment for Hispanics in public school contexts reveal similarly notable findings. [Grogan and Nash \(2021\)](#) find that racial diversity amongst public school superintendents has progressed slower than that of students, leading to a demographic imbalance between superintendents and the students they serve. The rate of representation of non-White superintendents in districts with a majority of students that qualified for free and reduced-price lunch was nearly twice as much compared to districts that did not have a majority of free and reduced-price lunch qualifying students ([Grogan and Nash, 2021](#)). [Davis and Bowers \(2018\)](#) similarly found that urban and large districts tend to have higher representation of non-White or female superintendents, and noted that male and White individuals are overrepresented in hires made for the superintendency compared to those who participate in traditional pathways/certification programs for the superintendency.

Three studies in particular highlight the experiences of Hispanic public-school superintendents. First, [Rodriguez's \(2019\)](#) exploration of the experiences of three Mexican-American female superintendents revealed the tendency of leaders who match minority ethnic and gender profiles is to lead districts that are small, rural, isolated, and of Hispanic majority. These “challenging” districts tended to mirror the backgrounds of these superintendents themselves ([Rodriguez, 2019](#)). Second, [Molina \(2016\)](#) compared the impacts between White and Hispanic district leaders of networking activities as part of the organizational leadership of superintendents and found that Hispanic superintendents’ impacts on Hispanic students might be limited by their environment. Finally, [Aceves \(2013\)](#) found that Hispanic superintendents often identified White, male, cross-race mentors at the university level or education field as critical in their success of navigating the dominant cultures in their workplaces and settings.

## Hispanic Educational Leadership

In expanding our examination to include Hispanic educational leaders beyond the role of the superintendency, we see a growing body of knowledge about the characteristics of Hispanic educational leadership relevant to our study. [Santamaria \(2014\)](#) identifies nine practices used by educational leaders of color, including the use of critical conversations, applying a critically oriented lens to problem solving, consciousness of stereotype threat, honoring constituents, and leading by example. These practices are operationalized in [Rodriguez, Martinez, and Valle \(2016\)](#), where Hispanic educational leadership is characterized through the importance of serving Hispanic families, navigating greater systems, developing leaders across the pipeline committed to promoting Hispanic representation, and fostering equity. The *testimonios* in [Martinez, Rivera, and Marquez \(2019\)](#) mirrored [Nicdao's \(2020\)](#) findings related to confronting gender roles, leaders' responsibilities to their own families, and the critical role played by mentorship in navigating predominately White institutions.

## Positioning the Study

This brief, non-comprehensive review of literature helps establish an opportunity for impact for the findings of the study. We see that the challenge of ensuring diverse representation and an acknowledgement of how the experiences of Catholic school superintendents are manifested across different contexts would benefit from a close examination of the practices, perceptions, and perspectives of a group of Catholic school system leaders who share in the cultural heritage of a notable contingent of Catholic school students and families. We also see a possibility to identify meaningful differences in how sectors shape and reshape the trajectory of Hispanic school system leaders, as there is a comparative lack of empirical research on the pathways of Hispanic Catholic school system leaders compared to their public-school counterparts. Finally, the review of literature suggests that there are discernible shifts in the practices of school system leaders that are drawn from their cultural heritage, and this study offers a line of inquiry that expands the examination of that phenomenon to the Catholic school sector.

## Methods

Given the study's focus on (a) the pathways and beliefs that characterize the experiences of Hispanic Catholic school diocesan leaders and (b) the impact of Hispanic Catholic diocesan system leaders' cultural heritage on their practice and perception of leading systems of Catholic schools, the research team developed semi-structured interview protocols to gather data on the narratives and perspectives of Hispanic Catholic school diocesan leaders. We sought to recruit individuals who were currently employed in leadership or administrative positions in Catholic school diocesan offices or chanceries within the United States and who identified as Hispanic. Participants were identified primarily from the National Catholic Educational Association's directory of Catholic

school superintendents, which is updated yearly and contains names and contact information for all staff holding a leadership position in a U.S. Catholic diocese. Through e-mail, solicitations of twelve individuals who, through the directory and/or through personal contact by members of the research team were identified as meeting the criteria for the study; eight participants expressed interest in participation.

After the recruitment process was completed, eight semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 30-60 minutes, were conducted with the Hispanic Catholic school diocesan leaders included in this study's sample. The sample was equally divided between men and women (four of each), equally divided between superintendents and assistant/associate superintendents (four of each) and all but one worked in an (arch)diocese in the western/far western region of the United States. Three of the four superintendents in the study were male, and three of the four assistant/associate superintendents in the study were female. Audio from interviews was transcribed, with personally identifiable information removed from transcripts (including, to the extent possible, removing references to names, places, and events that could be linked to a particular individual or diocese). Data analysis included iterative rounds of qualitative coding of the eight interview transcripts, and through a series of qualitative memos, a number of findings surfaced in response to the two research questions for this study.

## Findings

We identified three major themes present in the data related to the research questions. The first theme, the motivations of Hispanic Catholic school diocesan leaders to serve in their respective roles, responds directly to the first research question's focus on pathways and beliefs of Hispanic Catholic school diocesan leaders. The second theme, the dynamics of mentorship and community supports as experienced by these leaders, relates to the second research question's focus on the practices and perceptions held by Hispanic Catholic school diocesan leaders. The third theme, the factors that impact the pathways to leadership (including the role of intentional structures and supports to counteract barriers to leadership), blends findings related to both research questions and offers a glimpse into the potential interaction between the idiosyncracies of pathways and the operationalization of the perceived roles and responsibilities of a Hispanic Catholic school diocesan leader. The following sections articulate findings within each of the three themes.

### Motivation to Serve

Several factors play a role when searching for a job. "Understanding what motivates individuals to enter educational careers and remain in these positions long term is important for improving schools and helping to support top quality educators as teachers and leaders" (Ospino, 2022, p. 18). Considering the underrepresentation of Hispanic educators in Catholic school leadership at the superintendency level, aspiring leaders look at other factors to motivate and inspire them apart

from salary and benefits. This findings section chronicles the motivating factors of central importance for eight senior level Catholic school leaders who responded within the framework of why: (a) individuals seek employment within Catholic education; and (b) why do Hispanic leaders seek leadership roles within Catholic schools.

Fisher 2022 concluded the following, “The overwhelming consensus is that educators stay due to the Catholic Faith and the belief in what Catholic education stands for” (p. 272). This supposition was supported amongst several Hispanic Catholic school diocesan level leaders who described the attraction to work within Catholic schools as based on faith and the ability to model it in the workplace. One associate superintendent noted:

Being able to work within a Catholic school allows an individual to celebrate their faith within a context of their cultural background and not have to separate the two from each other. So, not necessarily that they couldn't do that within a public school, but I think, if anything, we're allowed to celebrate it. And it's encouraged for us to be able to share our faith backgrounds.

An additional motivational factor referred to by leaders was the opportunity to form the whole child. As defined by ACER and the Porticus Foundation, “Whole child development is a holistic development approach which aims to create the conditions within education systems and school communities that aims to develop the whole child, physically, socially, emotionally, and academically, with the active engagement and support of the community” (2021, p. 4).

When considering how the holistic development of a child is critical for the formation and development of future generations, one superintendent shared this:

... the handing on of whether the cultural patrimony and legacy that we possess – whether that's, again, the church's legacy and patrimony or society's – but it became more and more clear to me that in education, there was a real opportunity to be able to contribute more, to do more, to offer young men and women who had similar backgrounds to me, for example, or family experiences, the opportunity to be able to ... discover their God-given talents and gifts.

Consistently in the interviews, participating diocesan level leaders noted that an additional source of motivation to continue their vocation in Catholic schools is to assist other Hispanics to reach their full potential. Most commonly cited was the motivating force to impact the Hispanic students enrolled in Catholic schools in their dioceses. As one female superintendent commented, “So, part of that is why I've stayed in education ... because [of] how powerful education is to really

break down those barriers of poverty, or just ignorance, and knowledge for all of our communities, but specifically for our students of color. I think all of those things together have also continued for me to be a voice for maybe the voiceless or [for those who] aren't as loud as all of the others and to be the person in the room to say, that's not going to work in all of our schools." Drawing on research that supports exposure for children to literacy, [Bishop \(1990\)](#) describes the value of mirrors and windows in a child's world. In describing texts as mirrors and windows, mirror texts reflect our own lived experiences back to us, and window texts offer experiences that are unfamiliar to us and open up new understandings about the world. For Hispanic students, having Hispanic leaders offers a mirrored opportunity, where, as one leader shares, "...they see themselves in the kids. [Hispanic leaders] make sure that [Hispanic students] have better opportunities . . . We want you to do better than us, whatever that threshold might be. And they know that they deserve better."

Further, Hispanic leaders provide a window of opportunity to the majority of White students that attend Catholic schools, where a broader understanding of identity, diversity, and the many assets a culture that is different from one's own brings to a community are accessed. "The fact [is] that most of our population is Hispanic. It's a large Hispanic population that we're serving. So, it's filling the need. And almost every single leader that I've encountered— Hispanic leader, any leader that I've encountered that's in Catholic education— it's their own experience of their own formation whether it's in Catholic schools or something that triggered some sort of encounter that made them realize this was a mission that they were being called to" (Female Superintendent, West Coast).

As noted in the *Cultivating Talent* report, the public sector has led the way in exploring and investing in new strategies and initiatives to recruit and retain underrepresented educators ([Ospino, 2022](#)). This has led the public sector to create new educator preparation programs and pathways; scholarships and other funding supports; loan forgiveness programs; teacher residencies; "Grow Your Own" programs; mentoring and induction programs; and other initiatives ([Carver-Thomas, 2018](#)). As Catholic schools look to recruit and retain underrepresented teachers, Catholic schools can learn much from public sector peers who have explored and invested in a number of strategies and initiatives. While the pathway to an administrative position within public schools appears straight forward, the pathway to leadership within Catholic schools, in contrast, is more nuanced. The majority of the interviewees did not see themselves as a diocesan-level leader when they began their careers in Catholic schools. Rather, it was the invitation and encouragement of others that led them to consider their vocation:

I didn't seek out education as my professional vocation at all. In fact, it was a teacher of mine in my parish school who invited me. So, I always like to say this vocation found me; I did not find it. And God found me, and I think [He] invited me into this work.



These individuals saw their jobs as a vocation to serve others within Catholic schools. One male Superintendent commented, “. . . so the idea of service, and giving back, and using my education and career for good, to give and to contribute to the good of society, was really the underpinning.”

This is a distinct characteristic for those that started in Catholic school hierarchy versus those who began elsewhere. Leaders who worked their way up to diocesan level leadership positions were highly motivated by a desire to serve others, whereas those that started elsewhere ended up in Catholic schools after reconsideration within the public school sector. One leader was leaving their current (public school) leadership position due to a fiasco at a school graduation, another retired after 36 years in public education and wanted to “venture into something new.” A third leader progressed through public school policy, the operational and administrative side, executive leadership, and finally transitioned over to Catholic schools. The diversity in pathways demonstrates that there are a number of opportunities that one may take at various stages in one’s career to lead them to a vocation in Catholic education.

So, while Hispanic leaders overwhelmingly suggested that their work within Catholic education was guided by their faith and the call to serve others, they also mentioned that the encouragement and influence of others played a large role in their pathway to leadership. Therefore, aspiring Hispanic leaders should surround themselves with others that will build their capacity for leadership roles within Catholic education.

### **Mentorship and Community Supports**

As noted in the *Cultivating Talent* report, supportive mentoring relationships that bond educators and provide pedagogical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual support exemplify what being an educational community can and should be (Ospino, 2022). Distinct to Catholic schools, mentoring has been found to contribute to the mission of a Catholic school and individuals’ positive spirituality. Mentoring promotes development and learning, fosters self-direction and autonomy, and cultivates a collaborative workplace culture grounded in continuous learning (English, 2013). While researchers have widely promoted mentorship as a promising practice for professional learning and development in Catholic schools, there is little evidence that formalized mentorship programs have been embraced by Catholic school leaders (Vierstraete, 2005); further research shows efforts to mentor Hispanic teachers, leaders and other underrepresented educators in Catholic schools are even rarer (Ospino, 2022). Considering the evidence on the impact of mentoring, our study revealed that all superintendents were mentoring younger leaders in their own way. This section of our findings examines: (a) how Hispanic leaders of Catholic dioceses play a key role in mentoring younger Hispanic leaders; and (b) the impact of community supports that these diocesan leaders put in place to develop and retain educators.

During the inquiry regarding mentor relationships, a common theme emerged of superintendents’ faith being a driving force for them to be mentors and role models for the teachers and

principals in their diocesan system. The majority of participants noted a primary responsibility of theirs is to carry on the Catholic faith, serving as a source of inspiration for those in their community. Being a spiritual leader for the diocese has inspired other leaders and teachers to, “want to be able to speak the way you speak about faith” (Male Superintendent, Midwest). As another superintendent noted, the fruits of their faith were rooted in prayer life:

In ministry, what I would notice is that [with] all the prayers that I would give and offer up for the ministry, I would see them flourish. So, I see the activeness of the Holy Spirit working in what I do on a daily basis, not by any virtue of power in me, but by what I think God’s calling me to.

Drawing on the teaching of the Catholic faith to nurture, support, and inspire others was similarly heard by a third superintendent who noted that the catechism is “the source and summit of our faith, it really has become the driving force behind all of it . . . and that’s what I’m trying to inspire other leaders [to believe], because not everybody’s there in their own journey. They have understandings, or once all the things connect, it’s like you’ve got all this power. It’s not yours; It’s for you to give.”

Despite having a deep faith, and the platform for expressing their beliefs, the sample of Hispanic superintendents all noted there were times that their faith and beliefs were challenged:

My leadership team knew where I stood, my bishop knew where I stood, and yet, when I went out and we had a town hall I was accused of being the token. I was accused of the only reason you have that position is because of the color of your skin, and it’s hard not to react to them, but you can’t react to that because if you react to that, then you’re affirming their comments. Then, when you don’t affirm their comments, then you get the other side that you’re the coconut, and it’s a tough place to live to be a Hispanic in leadership and [to guide] other people who don’t look like you.

The questioning of one’s identity and role emphasizes the need for leaders to receive pedagogical, emotional and psychological support through mentoring relationships (Gist et al., 2021). For one superintendent, tending to the holistic care of the leaders and teachers in her diocese meant giving that, “extra little nudge or an extra little push, words of encouragement, [asking] how are things going – that kind of thing.” This ministry of presence was found to be really key, as a superintendent shared:

People need to see you; people need to hear you; people need to walk alongside of you; people need to hear your story . . . it’s very challenging . . . takes a lot of courage . . . I think

especially being a Latino teacher or Hispanic teacher to tell these kids, you know what you can do this regardless.

A number of respondents also commented how community supports, such as an affinity-based mentorship program and professional learning communities, really became an anchor for them when navigating their leadership role. As one superintendent noted, these anchors aim to support “Latino men and women who work in our schools, [by] trying to cultivate their leadership as well, [and] connecting them to resources and programs that are available. Those are [the community supports] I’ve seen have been successful.” Cultivating the talent that creates these networks of support was viewed as an essential part of their leadership, as they “recognize and see, one, first and foremost, that representation is important, and that not only is it important to have men and women of color working in, especially in, communities that serve high populations of children of color, but also that within that, we’re identifying potential and prospective leaders.”

The need to continuously identify new leaders was of high priority to superintendents. A method for this identification was through mentoring and establishing communities of support. While the value of professional guidance across an educator’s professional and vocational journey has been effectively researched ([Gist et al., 2021](#)), superintendents have an ability to establish social networks across a system of schools. The superintendents often “take it upon themselves to build intentional networks of support for their teachers . . . [and] are constantly looking for the next principal from within the community that can serve in some of these communities . . . We want to make sure that this is truly representative and diverse of the rich tapestry of the people of God in the local church here.”

Such professional learning collaborative designs have been found to be effective and often present an opportunity to widen the network of support among groups of educators within and across schools ([Moir et al., 2009](#); [Ospino, 2022](#)). As one superintendent noted, the challenge to implementing these social networks is “building successful educational communities that are committed to ongoing renewal, and improvement, and excellence,” especially when those same networks are “sometimes underappreciate[d] and undervalue[d]” (Male Superintendent, Midwest).

Although developing the pipeline of leaders is of central importance to the role of a superintendent ([Miller et al., 2022](#)), recognizing the leadership that exists in the classrooms is just as essential, and often goes unnoticed. In recognizing these leaders need communities of support, some superintendents formed leadership academies to meet this need.

The leadership academy was designed to identify potential leaders to assume leadership roles in our schools as perhaps lead teachers, perhaps assistant principals, and then finally to be principals. So, in that sense they were homegrown . . . and they have shown a lot of initiative and interest in possibly taking on a larger responsibility or a larger role.”

Diocesan offices and institutions of higher education that support Catholic schools have an opportunity to develop mentoring programs or to partner with existing professional organizations to better support Hispanic Catholic superintendents and the educators they serve. Expanding and improving current mentoring opportunities and facilitating support networks will likely have a significant and transformative impact on the retention of Hispanic Catholic superintendents, expand the pipeline of leaders across the United States, and better support all educators at various stages of their professional career.

### Facilitating Pathways

A critical finding from the interviews conducted with Hispanic Catholic school diocesan leaders relates to the resistance they faced against the idea of pursuing education as a viable career from within their local communities and relationships. For these leaders, these negative norms and beliefs driving the resistance these leaders faced manifested in internalized perceptions as well as their interactions with others. In some cases, the redirecting of aspirations happened far before careers in education were considered, as one superintendent shared:

And in my dissertation, I quote my high school counselor. When I was a junior, I was selecting my courses, and I wanted algebra and college prep bio, and some college prep courses. And she told me . . . “You need to think about auto-mechanics and woodshop and drafting.” I said, “I’ve thought about that. I’m going to college, and I need these classes.” . . . And this is going back to 1975, so it’s really not that long ago. But for me, that was a catalyst to say, I’m going to do more.

Just as [Papageorge, Gershenson, and Kang \(2020\)](#) found in their study on teacher expectations, this leader’s interaction with his high school counselor drove home the point that teacher expectations matter. In this particular vignette, the implicit norms and beliefs present in the counselor’s remarks – namely, the idea that selecting courses for college success (and inarguably, given the future pathway chosen by this educator, critical to the pathway of education leadership) was inappropriate given the student’s circumstances – created a strong and lasting impression that then shaded this leader’s journey towards Catholic school diocesan leadership.

Beliefs and values attached to these leaders’ cultural and ethnic heritage also surfaced as barriers to their aspirations and responses to what they perceived as limited opportunities for meaningful leadership. A female leader spoke of an early opportunity to take a significant step forward in her career as an educator and the discussions she had to navigate with her family as a first-generation Hispanic American:

The other aspect is that as Hispanics, we value family very much. And so, with that said, that can be a drawback for us Hispanics because we do not want to move away from our

communities. We want to stay with our communities. We want to stay with our families. We want to stay with our roots, and we don't want to move out. We don't want to branch out and have all these different experiences. (Female Superintendent, West)

In some cases, the desire to pursue a career in education specifically provoked resistance within families when they broke from that family's commonly held careers and occupations, as this superintendent shares:

[I was the . . .] first one [in my family] for the master's [degree], and the first one for a doctorate, because the tearing down happens in the family. "Do you think you're better than me, that's why you want to go to school? Your dad worked construction. Do you think you'll be better than your dad because you're going to go to school? What's the matter, you don't want to work with your hands anymore?" Those are the things I heard from my own cousins. (Male Superintendent, West)

These experiences of resistance to pursuing the education and opportunities that would later prove to be critical levers of success in the pathway to Catholic school diocesan leadership coexisted with common references by leaders in this study to the perception held by Hispanic families that education functioned as "the great liberator." The tension inherent in this coexistence strikes us as a novel finding, given the existing depth of research examining positive perceptions of pursuing educational opportunities within Hispanic families and communities ([Portnoi and Kwong, 2019](#); [Castellanos et al., 2013](#)).

Embracing attitudes of representation and framing the experiences and perspectives of Hispanic educators through an asset orientation played a key role in the testimony given by the leaders in this study. Those concepts figured strongly in descriptions of how leaders overcame barriers to their participation in the work of education as well as suggestions for how to create purposeful pathways and support for future Hispanic Catholic school leaders. In the case of the former, one leader recounted how a critical set of interactions with a Hispanic principal led to a greater ownership of the intersection of her identity as a Hispanic and as a Catholic school educator:

Part of the decision to stay was I was at a school that had a Hispanic principal that would say, "The kids need to see you; tell them your Notre Dame story. I want for them to know of someone that looks like them that's done it . . . someone who has immigrant parents, someone who started school not knowing any English." And so, she encouraged me to share my story and not to be embarrassed about it. Again, that's that external factor of someone having more faith in me than I did at the time and seeing a bigger vision and picture for me. (Female Superintendent, West)

When framed within the context of their cultural and ethnic heritage, the invitation to lead from that heritage brings forth a powerful transformation in perspective that stands in stark contrast to the beliefs and values that may have worked against these leaders in the past. The language of “need” features prominently throughout descriptions of potential strategies to support stronger pipelines; one superintendent claims that it is key to communicate in word and deed that “this mission needs your gifts and your experience.”

Although the invitation to lead appeared to be a spontaneous, informal phenomena in the lives of these Hispanic Catholic school leaders, many of the suggestions made by these leaders for improving the pipeline for future Hispanic Catholic school diocesan leadership referred to the need for intentional, formal structures and processes. Like the invitation to lead, intentional structures serve to reverse the pattern and impact of beliefs, values, and norms that negatively impact the patterns of representation of Hispanic leaders in Catholic schools:

It’s about the incentivizing. It’s about being intentional in [the] formation and recruiting [of leaders] and putting in residency programs. . . . We have to create safe venues for people to talk about these things [so] that they don’t become taboo, [and so] they don’t get talked about in corners or we only do it in private. We’ve got to be able to bring it out into the open because I think when we do that, we give grace and permission for people to really bring their full selves to this work. And when they do that, and they can be fully authentic, they’re able to reach kids in a far better way than hiding it and fearing that if they do bring out cultural differences, that somehow, they’ll be looked down upon. (Male Superintendent, Midwest)

At the core of this suggestion from a superintendent, we see a central belief that the identity, heritage, and charisma of a Hispanic Catholic school leader are all: (a) something to be desired and embraced, (b) subject to suppression and marginalization, and (c) necessary for greater impact on the students and families served in Catholic schools. Additionally, these components seem to speak to the elements of what these leaders perceived as the collective aim of advancing representation, particularly towards reversing the patterns of negative beliefs and values that Hispanics encounter on the journey to Catholic school leadership. Here, a superintendent describes the essential elements for an “intentional” program:

. . . an intentional, maybe even formal, program where we can bring in Hispanic/Latino talent and identify them and incentivize them staying through engagement, whether it’s professional networks or learning communities that are just for them that also allow them to tap into beginning to explore and discern leadership and what that means. But at a local diocesan level, and in my own superintendent circle or a network, I have yet to hear of something like that. (Male Superintendent, West)

Despite the lack of formalized, intentional programs (as this superintendent suggests), the networks of support may still exist. One superintendent spoke of moving to a new city to take up a principal position, and quickly finding a group of fellow Hispanic principal colleagues across schools that would “[get] together, socialize, network, and really use each other as a sounding board.” These findings add much-needed nuance to what [Molina \(2016\)](#) found in his study of the impact of networking and organizational performance with Hispanic superintendents, suggesting that the function of these types of structures and supports may not be primarily oriented toward resolving problems of practice related to student outcomes.

### Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on how Hispanic Catholic school diocesan leaders’ practices and perceptions of system-level leadership are shaped in tangible, distinct ways by the nature of their motivations and pathways. There appear to also be connections between motivationally and vocationally driven shifts to practice and direct impacts toward the diverse student and family communities they serve within their respective dioceses. We also find in the data gathered a number of barriers and challenges faced by Hispanic Catholic school diocesan leaders that pose important considerations for those looking to impact the field of Catholic education through increasing representation at multiple key levels of leadership. Within these barriers and challenges, we may begin to identify some of the particular sets of experiences and circumstances that are not comprehensively addressed or mitigated by contemporary practices in Catholic school leadership recruitment, retention, and formation.

Based on the experiences and suggestions shared by the Hispanic Catholic school diocesan leaders, a key area of focus for shifts in practice is that of re-envisioning the profile of the superintendency. Regardless of the ethnic and cultural identity of such a leader, the role of a Catholic school superintendent or equivalent diocesan leader is a complex, idiosyncratic set of roles and responsibilities that vary wildly between contexts and interfaces greatly with the climate for change and reform present in any given diocese ([Miller et al, 2022](#)). Greater inclusion for Hispanic Catholic school educators at the diocesan level of leadership may be rooted in reframing the role of the superintendency around the role of impacting students and families. As seen in [Hammel \(2021\)](#), the relative deprioritization of the “social justice commitment” embedded in the lived reality of Catholic school diocesan leadership may account for a lack of engagement and participation of Hispanic Catholic school educators in these roles; the interview data suggests that the desire to create positive trends in ethnic representation were the basis for the critical shifts in perspective and ambition that preceded a Hispanic Catholic school diocesan leader’s step into such a leadership role.

While the data gathered in this study did not closely examine the hiring processes of each of the leaders who participated, we would suggest that policymakers and stakeholders who can influence

the processes of hiring Catholic school superintendents and diocesan leaders carefully assess the extent to which the job description, roles and responsibilities, desired qualifications, and hiring criteria better match the motivations of prospective Hispanic Catholic school educators. This study shows that while the invitation to lead is an essential element for the journey of the Hispanic Catholic school diocesan leader, the challenges faced by these leaders in both their roles and in creating pathways for others to follow in their footsteps show that intentional structures and systems must coexist with the invitation to lead.

The presence of ongoing networks of support for these Hispanic Catholic school diocesan leaders was notably absent from the data we collected on their narratives and perspectives. Given Cook, Fussell, and Simonds' (2021) findings on the factors driving Catholic superintendents to leave their positions, we would expect that the experiences of isolation, discouragement, and feelings of inadequacy present in the leadership journey for these Hispanic leaders to remain or manifest in some way even after they have "made it," so-to-speak. In addition to the formal structures and initiatives recommended by participants in this study – professional learning communities, networking opportunities, leadership formation and discernment programs all geared specifically towards Hispanic Catholic school educators – we would recommend that these structures also contain components that provide support for leaders currently serving in diocesan leadership roles. This type of support is also important given the unique orientation and calling that Hispanic Catholic school educators bring to the role of diocesan leadership, and would amplify the impact of the previous suggestion to better align the roles and responsibilities of those roles with the motivations and aspirations of Hispanic Catholic school educators.

The insights gleaned from this study continue to provide opportunities for future scholarship around the issue of Hispanic educator representation in Catholic schools in the United States. Hispanic diocesan leaders are represented at a lower rate than that of Hispanic educators, and in turn, Hispanic educators are represented at a lower rate than that of Hispanic students in Catholic schools in the United States (Ospino, 2022). In the vein of the Davis and Bowers (2018) study, we suggest that the findings and recommendations from this and other studies on diocesan level leadership in Catholic schools would benefit from a more rigorous and comprehensive examination of professional pathways across racial and ethnic groups, regions, and sizes of Catholic school systems. Additionally, given the efforts past and present to increase the representation of Hispanic school-aged children in Catholic schools discussed by Ospino and Weitzel-O'Neill (2016) and Corpora and Fraga (2016) and more, we believe there is an increasingly viable opportunity to examine which elements of the Catholic school experience actually and significantly contribute to the shifts in the beliefs, values, and aspirations that precede the response to the call to serve as educators in Catholic schools. An examination of those salient elements of the Catholic school experience can assist Hispanic Catholic school leaders in their work to build vibrant pipelines of diverse and equitable leadership starting with the recruitment and retention of Hispanic Catholic school students.



### **Conclusion**

The narratives and perspectives of the Hispanic Catholic school diocesan leaders captured in this study crucially present a series of insights and opportunities for increasing Hispanic representation at the highest levels of Catholic schools in the United States. They additionally provide further knowledge as to the experiences of Catholic school diocesan leaders in general, which is of great need given the distinct demands and dynamics of such a role compared to that of their public-school counterparts. We hope that the dissemination of the insights and analysis encapsulated in this piece shed light on the possibilities for a future where inclusivity and responsiveness to the needs of diverse communities become the hallmarks of Catholic schools and systems.

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