

FOCUS SECTION

INCLUDING AND SERVING STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS: A REPORT OF PRACTICES

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Based on responses to a survey of 19 Midwestern Catholic dioceses, the author reports the mission, educational practice, and financial means utilized to serve students with special needs in Catholic schools.

The current agenda of PK-12 education reflects a widespread, powerful concern for the success of all students. Public schools are required to be accountable to the federal government and to state departments of education for the achievement and growth of all students. Catholic schools, while often not bound by the same reporting and testing requirements as public schools, are still accountable to their constituencies. A parallel phenomenon in a few large, public school districts is the enactment of laws permitting a choice that allows parents of economically disadvantaged students and/or those in under-achieving schools to leave those ineffective schools and choose others. The parents of many students enroll in school choice programs to send their children to Catholic schools. One reason noted by Greeley (1998) is that “the Catholic schools are especially likely to be successful with students who suffer from multiple disadvantages” (p. 24). Limiting consensus on the effectiveness of Catholic schools with respect to diverse populations is a lack of data with respect to controlling for student differences between schools, however (Coons, 1997).

In the late 1990s, some research about Catholic schools reflected a concern that they were becoming elite private schools that emphasized curriculum over spiritual formation; that they were, in fact, no longer the common schools for the Catholic masses (Baker & Riordan, 1998). As religious sisters, priests, and brothers ceased to fill the roles of low-cost, “contributed services,” Catholic school educators and the schools became staffed by lay faculty and costs rose such that parish financial support had to be supplemented by tuition paid by the parents of students who attended Catholic schools. As faculty costs continued to grow as a significant factor in the

operation of Catholic schools, many schools quickly concluded that they could not take on the additional costs that might be incurred in establishing programs for students with special needs. Greeley (1998) notes,

If the costs of Catholic education have forced Catholic schools to price themselves out of the market for some of the Catholic population, this is unfortunate.

However, from the church's point of view, the existence of the schools is justified because the church needs at least some young men and women who have had the experience of more intense Catholic training. (p. 25)

Thus, the notion of elitism can be framed by both family finances and the academic ability of students. Arguably, many students do not attend Catholic schools because their parents have decided it is not affordable. Others are turned away because of the inability of the schools to offer an appropriate education (Weaver & Landers, 2002).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The current study seeks to determine if a Midwestern group of diocesan Catholic schools considers it their mission to educate students of all abilities, the extent to which students with special needs are included in the population of Catholic schools, the types of special needs served, how students with special needs are served when included, whether Catholic schools incur additional costs in providing special needs services, and how those costs are met if incurred.

An overview of current research is provided, followed by a description of the research process and findings, themes present in the results, exemplary programs, implications for Catholic schools and policymakers, and questions for further study.

THE PERTINENT LITERATURE

THE INCLUSIVE MISSION OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

Regarding the inclusion of students with special needs in Catholic schools, Church documents state that "costs must never be the controlling consideration...since provision of access to religious functions is a pastoral duty" (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002). While Catholic schools have not compiled comprehensive statistics on the number of students with special needs served, Catholic schools are often perceived, however, as being less diverse and more academically elitist than public schools. "Catholic high schools do not generally have a reputation for serving stu-

dents with special needs” (Powell, 2004, p. 86). The provision of such services is an extra factor in determining parish and school resources (Russo, Massucci, Osborne, & Cattaro, 2002). Powell (2004) reports that Catholic schools either do not have or do not choose to provide the resources. Catholic schools typically have higher teacher to student and adult to student ratios (Coons, 1997). Given those conditions, parents of Catholic students with special needs are sometimes forced to choose between their desire for Catholic education and the need for special services (Russo et al., 2002).

INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES EDUCATION ACT (IDEA)

Russo et al. (2002) present a most thorough summary of the tenets of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (2000) as it applies to students in Catholic schools. Legally, these tenets are derived from the “child benefit theory” and “Lemon test” principles articulated by the United States Supreme Court and affirmed recently by the same court in *Agostini v. Felton* (1997), with respect to Title I services on-site. The salient points are:

- IDEA regulations require the identification of all children with disabilities, including those in non-public schools.
- Students with disabilities in religiously affiliated schools are entitled to receive services on-site.
- IDEA caps what public schools must spend for students with disabilities in non-public schools, but those schools and districts may elect to spend more.
- Likewise, IDEA requires that funding be available to non-public school students if needed, but the funds may not finance all the services that a student needs.
- Public funds may not be used to finance existing non-public school programs, but public schools may finance a variety of special services, including employment of private school teachers outside of their regular employment hours.
- Students with disabilities in private schools have the right to services from teachers who have the same qualifications as those in public schools, but the services may be less in quantity than those supplied to public school students because of the funding cap mentioned above.
- *Agostini v. Felton* (1997) specifically prohibits team teaching by teachers employed by public and religiously affiliated schools in the religiously affiliated school (Russo et al., 2002).

In addition, McDonald (2000) reports the following:

- Public school districts are required to consult with private schools about services, but the public school has the final decision.
- Services may be provided on-site in the Catholic school, but there is not an obligation to do so.
- Transportation for services is required.
- When state averages are compared, IDEA provides less than 10% of special education funding.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 describes students with disabilities by means of the following categories: mental retardation; vision, hearing and speech or language impairments; serious emotional disturbance; orthopedic impairments; autism; traumatic brain injury; other health impairments; and specific learning disabilities. English Language Learners (ELL), English as a Second Language Learners (ESL), and students who deal with obsessive compulsive disorder, anxiety disorder, depression, bipolar disorder, physical disabilities, Tourette's syndrome, and behavior and attention deficit disorders are included in this study. The special needs categories "gifted" and "eating disorders" are included in this study, but are not categories described in IDEA.

FINANCING STRATEGIES

The National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) has reported that Catholic schools utilize minimal, incremental state and federal funding (Tracy, 2000). Noting the lack of solid statistics on Catholic school students with special needs and that Catholic schools generally do not have or provide the resources for services to students with special needs, Powell (2004) observes that financial cooperation between the school and parents is becoming typical on the elementary level (p. 89). Powell further describes the situation at Paul VI High School in Arlington, Virginia, where parents agreed to pay as much as \$1,200 in addition to tuition for each student with a disability in 1998-1999. In 2003, fully 216 of 1,140 students had identified disabilities, and the 2003-2004 extra cost ranged from \$2,300 to \$3,500. Fundraising and parent and faculty commitment to the service of students with special needs is noted, especially by virtue of the school's practice of assigning its most effective teachers to work with students with special needs (Powell, 2004).

Cardinal Dougherty High School in Philadelphia features the integration of students with special needs, many of whom are too challenged to be included in a regular academic curriculum, into a regular Catholic high school by means of a "Best Buddies" program (Ryan, 2001). The students with special

needs' home school, Our Lady of Confidence, was built in 1954 to serve only students with special needs. In a recent personal communication with Counselor Jack Fitzsimmons and administrator Diana Van Fine, the author learned that the "Best Buddies" school-within-a-school program is in its seventh year and continues to serve about 60 students with mild to moderate handicaps. The extra costs associated with three full-time special education teachers, three teacher assistants, and a number of therapists are financed in the following ways: student tuition, with special needs students paying the standard tuition rate; subsidies from Catholic Charities, who originally financed 100% of the extra costs; and fund-raising. Serving as a "Best Buddy" is highly popular with Cardinal Dougherty students, who mentor during the school day and spend time socializing with their buddy outside of regular school hours.

METHOD

THE PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this study are Catholic diocesan superintendents or their designees. Dioceses falling into a general geographical description of "Midwestern" were identified through a web search. One to three dioceses from each state were invited to participate. Minnesota and North Dakota were the northernmost states, and Oklahoma was southernmost. Nebraska and South Dakota were westernmost, while Ohio was the easternmost state contacted. Twenty-six diocesan offices of Catholic schools were identified and 19 responded. The first invitation was made via e-mail with the survey instrument attached. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire and return it via e-mail. When sufficient time had elapsed for those responses to have occurred, a "hard copy" of the instrument was mailed to the school offices not responding. While there is some variation in the size of reporting Catholic school systems, size is not a consideration in either the questions asked or the categorization of the responses.

PROCEDURE

The survey instrument begins with a confidentiality statement. The author then enumerates the questions that the study intends to answer.

As noted earlier, special needs are identified as any of the following: mental retardation; vision, hearing, and speech impairments, including ELL and ESL; serious emotional disturbances, including obsessive compulsive disorder, anxiety disorder, depression and bipolar disorder; orthopedic impairments, including physical handicaps and severe and profound mental or physical handicaps; autism spectrum disorders; traumatic brain injury; other health impairments, including Tourette's syndrome; and learning dis-

abilities, including behavior disorders and attention deficit disorders. The categories of “gifted” and “eating disorder” are included in this study, but they are not IDEA categories.

Supplying directions for completing and returning the instrument, the author collected information via selected response questions that sought information on mission, types of students with special needs served in Catholic elementary and secondary schools, means used to serve those elementary and secondary students with special needs, the incidence of extra costs, and resources used to meet those costs. Following the selected response section, the author included two constructed response questions dealing with barriers to service of students with special needs and suggested solutions to eliminate those barriers.

FINDINGS

DISPOSITIONS

A total of 16 of the 19 diocesan representatives responding indicated that it was the mission of the Catholic schools in that diocese to make a Catholic education available to all students who desired it. Interestingly, however, only 8 of the respondents indicated that the mission intentionally included students with special needs. Ten respondents indicated that the mission of the schools in their diocese did not intentionally include students with special needs, and one diocese did not respond. A total of 15 of the 19 respondents indicated that a “special needs identification process” exists in the elementary schools of the diocese (4 responded “no”), and 14 indicated that elementary schools in the diocese generally serve students with identified special needs (one indicated both “yes” and “no”).

A total of 14 respondents also indicated the existence of a special needs identification process in the secondary schools of the diocese, while 4 indicated “no” and one not applicable.

Two of these latter 4 had also indicated no elementary process, but 2 had indicated an elementary student identification process. While 12 of the 19 respondents indicated that secondary schools in the diocese generally served students with identified special needs, 5 indicated “no” and 2 did not respond.

Nine respondents indicated that elementary schools in the diocese were more committed to serving students with special needs than secondary schools, while 10 replied “no” or did not respond. Only one diocese indicated a greater commitment to secondary students with special needs than elementary.

Table 1

Catholic Schools' Mission and Inclusion of Students with Special Needs

Statement	Yes	No	n/a
	<i>n</i> = 19		
Does the mission of the Catholic schools in the diocese promote the availability of a Catholic education for all students who desire it?	16	3	0
If so, does the mission intentionally include students with special needs?	8	1	10
Is there a special needs identification process in the elementary schools of the diocese?	15	4	0
Do elementary schools in the diocese generally serve students with identified special needs?	14	4	1
Is there a special needs identification process in the secondary schools of the diocese?	14	4	1
Do secondary schools in the diocese generally serve students with identified special needs?	12	5	2
Are elementary schools more committed than secondary schools to serving students with special needs?	9	8	2
Are secondary schools more committed than elementary schools to serving students with special needs?	1	17	1

CURRENT PRACTICE

Elementary Schools

Respondents were first asked to estimate the percentage of students with special needs who are served in the Catholic elementary schools of the diocese. While 3 offered no estimate, the other respondents indicated percentage ranges from 1% to 25%. The mean percentage was 9%, the mode was 5%, and the median was 8%.

Diocesan officials were asked to identify the types of student special needs that are served in the elementary schools of the diocese. All respondents indicated that their Catholic elementary schools served students with mild/moderate learning disabilities, mild behavior disorders, attention deficit and attention deficit with hyperactivity disorders, and vision, speech,

or hearing impairment. Sixteen systems provided service to elementary students with anxiety disorders and physical handicaps. Fifteen served students suffering from depression. A total of 14 of 19 served mentally disabled students, those with ESL/ELL special language needs, and those with Tourette's syndrome. Eleven of 19 reporting Catholic school systems indicated service to students with obsessive compulsive disorders, and 9 systems served students with brain injuries or bipolar disorder. Only 2 diocesan systems provided service to severely and profoundly disabled students. In non-IDEA disability categories, 16 systems provided service to elementary students identified as gifted and 14 served students with eating disorders.

Table 2

Types of Special Needs Served in Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools

Type of special need	Elementary schools <i>n</i> = 19	Secondary schools <i>n</i> = 17
IDEA disability categories		
Learning disability	19	17
BD/ADD/ADHD	19	16
Vision, speech, hearing or language impairments	19	16
ESL/ELL	14	13
Mental handicap (retardation)	14	10
Physical handicap (i.e., wheelchair bound)	16	11
Severe and profound handicaps	2	2
Autism spectrum disorders	13	8
Obsessive compulsive disorder	11	8
Traumatic brain injury	9	5
Anxiety disorders	16	12
Depression	15	15
Bipolar disorder	9	6
Tourette's Syndrome	14	6
Non-IDEA disability categories		
Gifted	16	13
Eating disorders	14	14

Catholic school systems responding to the study served their elementary students with special needs primarily through classroom teacher adjustments (19/19), use of special materials (15/19), through services provided by local public schools (15/19), certified special educators (14/19), paraprofessionals (13/19), and learning consultants/instructional facilitators (11/19) employed by the Catholic schools. Strategies utilized less frequently were reported to be smaller classes and special care teams. Seventeen of the 19 respondents indicated that there were additional costs to the Catholic elementary schools associated with serving students with special needs. Tables 1, 2, and 3 summarize these data.

Table 3

Strategies Used by Catholic Schools to Serve Students with Special Needs

Strategy used	Elementary schools <i>n</i> = 19	Secondary schools <i>n</i> = 16
Adjustments by regular teacher in classroom	19	16
Certified special educators employed by Catholic school	14	11
Paraprofessionals	13	7
Smaller class sizes	8	10
Special materials	15	11
Personnel or services from public schools	15	8
Learning consultants or instructional facilitators	11	7
Care teams	3	4
Other	2	1

Secondary Schools

Respondents were first asked to estimate the percentage of students with special needs who are served in the Catholic secondary schools of the diocese. While 4 offered no estimate, the respondents indicated percentage ranges from .5% to 22%. The mean percentage was 8.3%; the mode was 5, 10, and 20%, and the median was 8.5%.

Seventeen of the 19 respondents reported about their Catholic secondary schools. All 17 of the school systems indicated that Catholic secondary schools served students with mild/moderate learning disabilities. Sixteen

systems served secondary students with mild behavior disorders, attention deficit disorder, and vision/speech/hearing disorders. Fifteen systems' secondary schools served students with depression, and 12 served students with anxiety disorders. Thirteen systems provided service to secondary students with ESL/ELL needs. A total of 11 diocesan systems provided service to students with physical handicaps, 10 to those with mental handicaps, 8 to those with autism and obsessive compulsive disorder, 6 to students with Tourette's syndrome and bipolar disorder, and 5 to students with a brain injury. Finally, the same 2 systems that provided service in Catholic elementary schools to students severely and profoundly handicapped also provided that service to secondary students. Reporting on non-IDEA disability categories, 14 systems helped students with eating disorders, and 13 provided service to secondary gifted students.

With respect to the means chosen to serve secondary students with special needs, Catholic school systems responding to this portion of the study (16) indicated that they all utilize classroom teacher adjustments. Eleven of the 16 dioceses responding noted use of certified special educators employed by the Catholic schools and use of special materials. Ten systems use smaller classes, while 8 utilize services provided by the local public school district. Seven systems employ paraprofessionals and learning consultants/instructional facilitators. Four systems indicated use of a "care team." Of the 16 respondents to this portion of the study, 14 indicated additional costs to Catholic secondary schools associated with serving students with special needs. The same 2 systems that indicated no additional costs on the elementary level repeated that report for secondary student programs.

RESOURCES

Describing the resources Catholic school systems use to meet the additional costs of special needs programming is a central purpose of this study. A total of 17 of the 19 dioceses responding reported on their use of resources for students with special needs. Fifteen of the 17 indicated that they use regular Catholic school funds to serve students with special needs. Twelve systems indicated use of federal funds and local public school district funds. Ten diocesan systems reported use of funds from their states, such as block grant funds. Eight systems applied funds from special benefactors to the costs of special needs services. Seven used funds from special grants they had received. Six systems employed funds derived from Catholic school foundations. Five dioceses did special fund raising to offset special needs costs. One system had special tuition surcharges, and one other system supplied extra diocesan funding supplements for those student costs. Data on resources are reported in Table 4.

Table 4

Resources Used by Catholic Schools to Serve Students with Special Needs

Type of resource	Number of dioceses using <i>n</i> = 17
Federal funds	12
State funds	10
Local public school district funds	12
Regular Catholic school funds (tuition, parish school subsidy)	15
Tuition surcharges for students with special needs	1
Special fundraising	5
Catholic school foundation	6
Diocesan supplements to schools for additional costs incurred in serving students with special needs	1
Grants	7
Special benefactors	8

BARRIERS THAT INHIBIT CATHOLIC SCHOOLS FROM SERVING MORE STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Responding to a constructed response question concerning significant barriers to the service of students with special needs in Catholic schools, systems reported the following:

- Fourteen indicated limited funds as a barrier.
- Seven systems indicated teachers untrained in working with students with special needs and/or a shortage of teacher candidates with special education certification, even if the schools could afford to hire them.
- Three systems noted classroom teachers not confident in their ability/skills for serving students with special needs.
- Five systems reported age of existing school buildings, resulting in accessibility and space issues as significant barriers.
- Two respondents saw the absence of a mindset/commitment in Catholic school and parish leadership that service to students with special needs is important as a barrier.

- Other barriers noted once were:
 - A perception that there is a “one size fits all” approach that helps students with special needs;
 - A perception that public schools and Catholic schools serve students with special needs very differently;
 - Better education of students about students with special needs;
 - Demands on teachers to deal with multiple aspects of diversity;
 - Lack of cooperation with public schools;
 - Catholic school admission standards that rule out students with special needs.

SOLUTIONS TO THE BARRIERS NOTED

Study participants made the following suggestions as solutions to the barriers noted above:

- Regarding finances:
 - more equitable monies should be sought from IDEA;
 - more teacher preparation grants;
 - special diocesan subsidies for parents of students with special needs to pay increased tuition;
 - public school providing more services on site;
 - improved federal and state support including funds for facility enhancement;
 - asking parents to pay higher tuition to offset additional costs;
 - finding reliable sources of funds, such as the establishment of a foundation to provide sustained funds beyond start-up efforts.
- Regarding the mission and commitment of Catholic schools to service of students with special needs:
 - Five respondents suggested faculty, parent, board member and pastor education on why students with special needs should be included in the Catholic school and how it can be done.
 - Parishes and schools should conduct needs assessments to establish facts.
- To improve faculty “confidence:”
 - Four systems suggested more faculty education, perhaps via coaching models such as described below.
 - Use of learning consultants to guide faculties.
 - More teacher participation in Individualized Education Planning (IEP) procedures.

- Finally, one respondent suggested that diocesan accreditation procedures or policies might include a component that requires the identification of students with special needs in each school.

NOTABLE CURRENT PRACTICES

A number of the dioceses responding to this study included details of programs already developed to serve students with special needs. The Archdiocese of St. Louis has employed a learning consultant model for more than 10 years. The consultant works with classroom teachers to aid in understanding of student special needs and development of strategies to meet those needs. The archdiocese also employs a care team model to devise instructional modifications when the consultant is not a feasible option.

The diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Missouri, has established the Foundation for Inclusive Religious Education (FIRE) “to provide children with special needs the opportunity for an inclusive Catholic education in their home parish schools” (<http://www.fire-program.org/MissionVision.htm>). The FIRE Board of Directors budgeted nearly \$160,000 in 2004-2005 for grants to five diocesan schools for certified educators, para-professionals, materials, and continued training.

The Archdiocese of Kansas City, Kansas, has developed a program called Perfect Wings to ensure educational opportunities in Catholic schools for all students. This program was developed following a needs analysis in all schools showing that administrators and teachers wanted training and consultation available to better serve students with special needs. Currently, Perfect Wings has a three-fifths time consultant available to work with all schools in the diocese. In collaboration with the Special Education Task Force, Perfect Wings publishes a quarterly newsletter on topics related to the service of students with special needs. Catholic school teachers are encouraged to network with their public school colleagues to learn more about serving students with special needs in other settings.

Both the Archdiocese of Indianapolis, Indiana, and the Diocese of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, employ solutions using the acronym REACH. In Indianapolis, Recognizing Excellence in All Children (REACH) is a teacher coaching model aimed at training teachers in brain compatible learning differentiation and other supports to help them meet student needs. The program also helps teachers learn how to teach reading using a multi-sensory approach.

In Sioux Falls, Religious Education for All Children (REACH) began in June 2002 and aims to include students with special needs in school programs, religious education, and parish events. Angie Quissel, Director of

Inclusion for the diocese, reports that REACH set an endowment goal of \$100,000 and has been able to grant some funds during the past year (A. Quissel, personal correspondence, 2004). A program brochure is available that describes how some of the funds have benefited children to date.

EMERGING THEMES

MISSION AND PRACTICE

The stated mission of most Catholic schools is inclusive and promotes the availability of programs to all students. Schools are somewhat inconsistent, though, in the actual practice of serving students with special needs. The data in this study show, however, that Catholic schools are likely serving more students with special needs than is the common perception. The Catholic schools surveyed generally employ some type of special needs identification process. Most of the students with special needs attending Catholic elementary schools receive some type of extra service. Data indicate that Catholic elementary schools are more committed to serving students with special needs than the high schools, and Catholic high schools in the study do, in fact, serve fewer students with special needs. Students with special needs comprise approximately 8-9% of the population of all Catholic schools in the study.

All elementary schools report making modifications for students with mild special needs; vision, speech, and hearing disabilities; students with English language needs; and most address those physically and mentally handicapped. Few serve students with serious or complex needs, such as severely and profoundly disabled students.

All elementary schools report serving students with special needs through modifications by the regular classroom teacher. Most adjust materials, use public school resources, and employ certified special educators and/or paraprofessionals. Most of these schools report additional costs incurred by serving students with special needs.

Almost all Catholic secondary schools report serving students with mild special needs including vision, hearing, and speech. Approximately two thirds of the reporting schools serve students with English language needs and students with mental and physical disabilities. Fewer than one third indicate serving students with serious or complex needs. Of the 19 reporting systems, the same 2 serve severely and profoundly disabled students on both the elementary and secondary levels.

Secondary schools also use classroom teacher adjustments extensively. Two thirds employ certified special educators, use special materials, and schedule smaller classes for students with special needs. Responding secondary schools utilize public school resources more infrequently than ele-

mentary schools. Most secondary schools indicate incurring extra costs when serving students with special needs.

Both elementary and secondary schools report consistent service of students who are gifted and those with eating, anxiety, and depression disorders. A follow-up study needs to be conducted to determine if these students are served in the classroom or by specialists or counselors, and if there are any significant differences in the effectiveness of various strategies.

RESOURCES

Regular Catholic school funds, likely tuition and parish subsidies, are used by the reporting systems extensively to meet the extra costs incurred in serving students with special needs. Most systems make use of federal, state, or local public resources. About half of the systems responding report cultivating special benefactors or obtaining grants. A few employ special fundraising to meet special needs costs. Only one system indicated a tuition surcharge to parents of students with special needs, and only one system reported schools receiving extra funding from the diocese for extra costs incurred in serving students with special needs.

The most significant barriers to improved service of students with special needs in Catholic schools were reported as inadequate funding, insufficient teacher preparation and confidence, inaccessible buildings, and inconsistent commitment from parishes and boards. Solutions include obtaining training grants for teachers, improving federal and state support, and leading more effective education of parents, pastors, and boards regarding the reasons for including students with special needs in Catholic schools.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CATHOLIC SCHOOLS AND POLICYMAKERS

The mission of the Catholic Church is clear concerning access to religious education and opportunities for all. Catholic school leaders should more clearly promote a welcoming message to families of students with special needs. It does seem that Catholic schools are serving more students with special needs than is commonly perceived. That message should be communicated clearly to all public schools as well. Dioceses and schools having success in programming and financing for students with special needs need a forum for broader dissemination of their efforts. Many high schools have much to learn from elementary schools in the identification and service of students with special needs.

Catholic diocesan leaders can make a more sustained effort to educate pastors, boards, and parents about the need to include students of all abilities

in Catholic schools. Catholic school leaders must secure and make better use of the public resources available to all students through federal and state programs. Likewise, diocesan leaders must provide resources to schools for teacher training and subsidies to schools for the additional costs of special needs programs for students. Retro-fitting buildings for access by students with special needs is a significant issue requiring long-range planning, including opening a dialogue with other non-public or public schools about additional collaborative efforts.

The development and long-range planning abilities of the typical diocese are stronger than those of individual schools or parishes. If helping schools meet the costs of educating more students with special needs means a greater development effort on the diocesan level to establish foundations, secure grants, identify special benefactors, or conduct additional fundraising, let that be the plan. While a phase-in period may be needed for a broader implementation of service to students with special needs in Catholic schools, no school should be allowed to opt out.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Questions meriting further study include:

- If students in Catholic schools are not receiving some public school services to which they are legally entitled, why not?
- Catholic schools seem willing to ask parents to “ante up” to serve student interests such as special academic programs, technology, arts, languages, and co-curricular activities. Are schools willing to do the same for programs for students with special needs?
- To what extent do (or can) Catholic schools collaborate with other religiously affiliated, private or public schools to form “special needs cooperatives” to benefit students with special needs in all of those schools?

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