

## Fostering Community through the House System at Most Holy Trinity Catholic School

Michael C. Brennan

Director of Schools, Rochester Catholic Schools, Minnesota

*Most Holy Trinity Catholic School in Phoenix, Arizona, has experienced a decrease in student enrollment over the last decade, resulting in a reduction to a single class per grade across the PreK-8 community. Recent concerns have surfaced regarding student and teacher isolation, marginalization, and their effects on the broader relationships within the school community. To address these issues, school leaders implemented a house system in an effort to foster stronger communal relationships. This action research project used a survey design to gather quantitative and qualitative data to examine changes in stakeholder perceptions of community and Catholic identity after implementing the intervention. Results indicated that the implementation of the house system led to significant positive changes in stakeholders' perceptions of school community and Catholic identity.*

**D**id Hogwarts and Harry Potter have it right? As silly a question as this may seem, the truth is J.K. Rowling's fictitious boarding school for wizards and witches, and the way in which it was organized, served as the inspiration guiding a systematic inquiry undertaken at Most Holy Trinity Catholic School. This action research was designed to evaluate the implementation of a house system and its subsequent impact on perceptions of community and Catholic identity. This small Catholic school makes no apologies or excuses for its inability to compete with Hogwarts' airborne-prone students, its curriculum of spells and charms, or the perilous games of Quidditch played on its infamous pitch. Nevertheless, they do share a unique commonality as educational institutions commissioned with the responsibility to foster the hearts and minds of their students and reveal the community that resides among them.

Wizards aside, the fantasy world of young Harry and his friends was deeply rooted in the competitive yet communal ethos of the house culture in which the school's students were immersed. A significant impression of camaraderie, a sense of belonging, and a shared commitment to one another prevailed in this climate dominated by a collective association to one's dormitory or living quarters. Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin served

a far greater purpose than providing a place to rest and retire at the end of a long day of sorcery and proved a rather instrumental tool in developing an atmosphere permeated by community and grounded in relationships. Similarly, the concept of relationships is at the very heart of this action research project. The inquiry set out to explore the dynamic of these human experiences and evaluate the development of such in and through the careful implementation of a house system within the overall culture of the school—a culture that has slowly transformed and taken on a fragmented identity over the last decade.

In their document, *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith*, the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education stated that, “every human being is called to live in a community, as a social being, and as a member of the People of God” (1982, para. 22). This call to live in harmonious communion with our Christian brethren is embedded in the very name of our school and parish. As three persons in one, the Mystery of the Trinity serves a central role in the educational philosophy of Most Holy Trinity Catholic School and is the source of its spiritual pulse. The Sacred Congregation asserts that “the Catholic school, far more than any other, must be a community” and that the “Christian faith, in fact, is born of and grows inside a community” (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 53). However, the existence of a community is contingent upon the presence of individuals who collectively generate such a body. Unfortunately, the school has seen a steady decline in student enrollment over the years. Where once a daily attendance record would boastfully account for the presence of over 400 students, it now anxiously tallies just 167. Numerous factors have contributed to this significant decline in student enrollment, factors not unfamiliar to the many Catholic schools nationwide. Six administrations in 7 years, changing parish and neighborhood demographics, and competition from rapidly growing public charter schools, to name just a few, have played a part in Most Holy Trinity Catholic School’s increasing vulnerability and precarious financial position.

One result of a dwindling student population is a growing sense of fragmentation and compartmentalization within the school. With only one-class-per-grade, and many of those with rosters indicating only seven to 20 students, classroom dynamics have become stagnant and stale. Students have found themselves with decreased opportunities for social interaction among their peers as a consequence of a limited population from which to draw. Cross-grade interaction among grade levels is rare. In fact, in some instances this becomes a reason for parents, although with reluctance, to seek educational opportunities for their child elsewhere, only further compounding the issue.

The goal of this research was not to remedy the school's enrollment concerns, but rather to work with those students and classrooms that are present to determine if by implementing the house system a measurable growth in the spirit of community and the overall perception of the school's Catholic identity will ensue. Due to enrollment, limitations in the organizational structure of Most Holy Trinity Catholic School's educational program have impeded opportunities for students and faculty to experience supportive and developmental socialization across grade levels. With a one-class-per-grade organizational structure, teachers are bound to the island of their own classroom and lack grade-level partners and subsequent collegial articulation on this axis. Likewise, students are fixed in a classroom population that changes little with respect to its diversity. Class sizes have only been getting smaller and further restricting opportunities for social interactions with varied student groups. Many would argue that a small school brings students and teachers together, developing a cohesive family atmosphere and strengthening the bonds of friendship and trust. Though this may be valid at Most Holy Trinity Catholic School on a number of levels, there is great concern for those students who experience social marginalization and teachers who feel isolated from a broader professional community because of the existing structure.

The present enrollment of Most Holy Trinity Catholic School includes 167 students in grades preK-8. This student population represents 83% in-parish families, 15% out-of-parish Catholic families, and 2% non-Catholic families. The majority of the student body is White (56%) with the largest minorities being Hispanic (20%) and multi-racial (16%). The remaining 8% include African-American, Native American, Pacific Islander, and Asian students. Most Holy Trinity Catholic School serves a neighborhood with a diverse economic base; however, the majority of students come from families in the low- to middle-income range.

Most Holy Trinity Catholic School has a dedicated faculty and staff who believe strongly in Catholic education and the success of their students. The staff is certified according to state and diocesan guidelines and has an average teaching experience of 6 years. At the present time, 60% of the teaching staff holds master's degrees. Opportunities for ongoing professional growth and spiritual development are available via workshops and in-services attended by the staff throughout the year. Currently, 90% of the faculty holds their Catechist Certification, with the remaining working toward obtaining certification in the near future following diocesan mandates.

However, despite all of these positive elements relative to diversity and professional qualifications, many concerns expressed by both teachers and administration exist regarding the sense of community at the school. Therefore, as school leader it was my responsibility to fully ensure that such anxieties are addressed and potential interventions researched.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this action research was to evaluate the development process, implementation, and impact of the house system on the Catholic identity and fostering of community among various stakeholders at Most Holy Trinity Catholic School. The major research questions considered in this action research project include:

1. How does the house system contribute to a holistic, cross-grade community at Most Holy Trinity Catholic School?
2. How do various groups of stakeholders rate their sense of overall school community through their participation in the house system?
3. How does the house system influence students' sense of belonging and/or community within their respective grade level compared to the school as a whole?
4. How does the house system facilitate the development of a collegial atmosphere among Most Holy Trinity Catholic School's faculty and staff?
5. How does the implementation of the house system at Most Holy Trinity Catholic School impact stakeholders' perception of Catholic identity?

### **Literature Review**

An abundant literature details the important role of climate, culture, and community in educational institutions and Catholic schools specifically. The vast majority of this literature was unearthed in documents published and distributed by the Catholic Church and its bishops. Thus, as this study is focused on, and geared toward, the effects on community and identity as a result of implementing a house system in a Catholic school, to a large extent this literature review has drawn upon the wealth of such documents. However, supplemental resources were also researched and discussed to ensure balance. Unfortunately,

a dearth of references on the concept and results of the house system model's implementation within schools existed, especially primary schools such as Most Holy Trinity Catholic School. Much of the literature involved secondary or postsecondary schools. However, the general subject presented in these articles and studies can be applied to the primary school environment and thus provided sufficient background for the area under discussion.

### **Catholic School Culture, Identity, and Mission**

Like any organization, public or private, the Catholic school is not without its own unique characteristics of culture and identity. These distinctive qualities inherent in the ethos of effective establishments, whether corporate entities or exclusive institutions, are precisely what provide their members with a more meaningful sense of mission and purpose (Schein, 1992). By adopting practices that support the development of such a culture, the successful end result is a climate permeated by a pervasive sense of unity and belonging. This, in turn, serves as catalysts to transmit organizational loyalty as well as institutional sustainability and longevity. Cook (2001) stated,

The culture of Roman Catholicism, for example, offers a unique vision about human existence and a configuration of core commitments that enable its members to bring that vision to fruition. This vision and configuration of core commitments is what distinguishes Catholics, their experience of God, and their spiritual imagination from members of other religious traditions. The most effective and authentic Catholic schools, then, provide members an experience of a way of life that springs from this Catholic vision. (p. 95)

According to Greeley (1990), human beings are constantly searching for meaning in their lives and for most people it is within the construct of religion where they find validation and a sense of satisfactory closure in this quest. In essence, "religion provides a purpose, a code of behavior, and a lens for interpreting the world" (Cook, 2001, p. 6). It is within the walls of Catholic schools where one finds the Church flexing its most powerful muscle in the transmission of the faith, whereby the school functions as a formidable agent "in the evangelizing mission of the Church and is the privileged environment in which Christian education is carried out" (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1998, para. 11). In fact, the Catholic school derives its purpose from this

very sense that Christianity is not simply a system of beliefs but a way of life and therefore functions as a vehicle to promote the faith within the hearts and upon the minds of the children it seeks to serve.

In the discussion that involves the culture and identity of Catholic schools, one must come to identify these facets as experiential assemblages of two critical elements. The Congregation for Catholic Education (1998) stressed the necessary synthesis between faith and culture, declaring that “in the Catholic school’s educational project there is no separation between time for learning and time for formation, between acquiring notions and growing in wisdom” (para. 14).

The Catholic school finds itself in a very unique position within the context of the Church. Not only does it reside at the heart of the Church, functioning to fuse the elements of faith and culture, but “it is from its Catholic identity that the school derives its original characteristics and its structure as a genuine instrument of the Church, a place of real and specific pastoral ministry” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1998, para. 11). Therefore, rooted even deeper in the mission and identity of the Catholic school is its distinguished place as an ecclesial entity. The Congregation for Catholic Education (1998) stated that the ecclesial dimension “is not a mere adjunct, but is a proper and specific attribute, a distinctive characteristic which penetrates and informs every moment of its educational activity, a fundamental part of its very identity and the focus of its mission” (para. 11).

Community responds to the call for executing this ecclesial dimension, so it is important to define such a term. Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993) suggested community is an amalgamation of both the face-to-face interactions among groups of individuals, inclusive of children and adults, as well as a shared set of norms established to create parameters that instruct how these interactions unfold. However, for the sake of this action research, it is pertinent to view community through a theological lens and in light of its place in Catholic schools. Grace and O’Keefe (2007) suggested, “...the transition from the school as an institution to the school as a community is one result of the Church’s new self-awareness of being a communion,” or in other words, a conglomerate entity composed of the individual faithful—the living body of Christ Himself (p. 468).

Most succinctly, God’s grace is made present to us through our experience of community. Just as God resides in community within the Trinity, His presence is made known to us in our echoing of that divine mystery through our relational, grace-filled experiences with others. In this sacramental light,



Groome (1996) suggested that we encounter God's grace and presence in myriad ways: in our own hearts, minds, and bodies; through our human connections; indeed, "through all forms of human art and creativity, through nature and the whole created order, through everything and anything in life" (p. 112).

Thus, the sacramental qualities of Catholicism are inseparable from the experiences of our world, mainly those that involve the communal and social nature of our existence. As the Congregation for Catholic Education (1998) so eloquently stated, "the Catholic school sets out to be a school for the human person and of human persons" (para. 9). It is in this spirit of community that the Catholic school finds a special purpose, while the individuals who execute its objectives experience a call to develop a unique and distinctive climate within its walls. As a collaborative unit of stakeholders, the Catholic schools "orient the whole of human culture to the message of salvation that the knowledge which the pupils acquire of the world, of life and of men is illumined by faith" (Vatican Council II, 1965, para. 8).

The Congregation for Catholic Education (1998) stressed the importance of school climate in the formation process of students. Teachers and administrators have significant responsibilities to nourish and foster community in alignment with the evangelical mission of the Church and those of their specific educational institutions. The Congregation went on to say that "the community dimension should be fostered, since it is one of the most enriching developments for the contemporary school" (p. 18). Granted, "prime responsibility for creating this unique Christian school climate rests with the teachers, as individuals and as a community," however, it is also helpful to view the culture and sense of community in Catholic schools through the lens of the family unit and perhaps the best model by which a Catholic school can draw its operational naissance (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 26). According to the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education (1982), "the family is the first and fundamental school of social living" (para. 34). Schools are an extension of that first family, trying to "create a community school climate that reproduces, as far as possible, the warm and intimate atmosphere of family life" (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 40).

Because many of the students who attend Catholic school will do so from a very early age until they have nearly reached adulthood, it is expected that their perceptions of the school be an extension of their own homes and should therefore have aesthetic and relational components that contribute to the development of a "pleasant and happy family atmosphere" (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 27). Unfortunately, even in those schools

privileged to embrace the Catholic culture of community and the holistic educational philosophy guided by the Gospel spirit of freedom and love, educators still find themselves confronted with children who “live in an environment devoid of truly human relationships; as a result, they suffer from loneliness and a lack of affection” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 11). It is ever more necessary for leaders in Catholic schools to funnel their resources and energies into fostering the growth of an environment where shared values and beliefs become the soul of its culture.

### **The House System in Schools**

Bryk et al. (1993) found that the cultivation of a sense of unity and community was a key factor in developing a climate of excellence in schools. It is nevertheless imperative to suggest this is not always an easy task for schools and their respective leaders on whom this responsibility ultimately falls. In their observations, Heft and Davidson (2003) concluded that young people today largely exhibit, “skepticism about social institutions [which are] accompanied by an emphasis on the potency of the individual’s personal experiences and the authority of one’s own conscience” (p. 410). Their early experiences, however, are formative and long-lasting, holding the potential to impact academic achievement, civic engagement, and Church participation.

That said, it becomes evident for leaders in schools to actively seek methods for developing a strong community climate. Research shows that one effective tool for achieving this aim is through the implementation of the house system or schools within schools (Deal & Kennedy, 1983; Dierenfield, 1975, 1976; Green, 2006; Hooper, 1999; Oxley, 1994). Though the majority of literature on this topic is embedded in the context of high schools and post-secondary schools, the conceptual nature of the house system and its effects on community development can be applied to primary educational institutions.

The development of the house system is deeply rooted in European education traditions, in particular, England. The academic institutions of history’s medieval period would often have students attending that did not reside directly on the school’s main campus. Over time, the homes inhabited by these students came under the governing control of the institution and placed administrators, known as house masters, in charge of the facilities’ operations. As England’s educational systems grew and matured, the house system and its unique organizational identity were transferred to newly developed schools. Incorporating such a design into the managerial scheme of school structure



continued a progressive tradition that resulted in community atmospheres permeated by a sense of pastoral care for students (Dierenfield, 1975).

Dierenfield (1975) suggested that one answer to the pervasive issues of fragmentation and isolation in U.S. schools is the very implementation of the house system and its organizational structure into the American educational system. He cited the attention to a “personal touch” in English comprehensive schools such that despite large enrollments and larger classes allows them “to maintain a high level of pastoral care for the students” via house systems (p. 605). Dierenfield’s (1976) follow-up research pointed to the benefits of house system interventions and their emphasis on nurturing student development. In considering the English system, he suggested that “one of the most distinctive and laudable features is the pastoral care provided for pupils during their education. This interest in the individual welfare of each young person has enriched the school experience for generations of children” (p. 5).

The supportive dimension of the house system is instrumental in its success in educational environments. The idea of establishing unified divisions in schools, though semantically contradictive, creates an atmosphere of intimacy and closeness among students and colleagues. Much of the research supporting house systems, or the not entirely synonymous but very closely related, schools within schools, stems from literature grounded in the study of small schools in general. Hooper (1999) presented a rather lengthy list of the positive effects of small school populations on school climate and student achievement. He suggested small schools provide students a more humanistic experience and are more successful than large schools in fostering student engagement and motivation. Hooper stated,

People in small schools come to know and care about one another to a greater degree than is possible in larger schools, and rates of parent involvement are higher. Staff and students are found to have a stronger sense of personal efficacy [and] small-school students tend to take more responsibility for their own learning. (p. 4)

According to Oxley (1994) and Green (2006), in today’s large school populations, the alienating effects on students are more profound than ever. Larger school sizes typically correlate with increased absenteeism, poor school climate, decreased student involvement in extracurricular activities, and increases in vandalism, violence, and student drop-out rates. “Further, the social and psychological support formerly provided by the families and communities appears

to have declined, especially among the urban poor, which suggests that today's students may be even less able to cope with large schools" (Oxley, 1994, p. 522). Thus, the need presents itself in many American educational institutions to create smaller social units that provide students a sense of unity, self-worth, and responsibility. Though much of the research discussed thus far has been centered on large school environments as the villain in poor student achievement and meager school climates, the same can exist in schools with low student populations if the organizational structure is established in a way that fails to nurture, and rather discourages, close relationships between students and teachers (Dierenfield, 1975). This attention to individual care is inherent to the house system design.

House system organization begins by dividing a school population into several units, or houses, on a vertical plan, in order to ensure an equitable distribution of students from all grade levels in each individual house. In the case of elementary schools, this can involve a considerable disparity and range in age, but can also have significant effects on student tendencies to exhibit pastoral behaviors toward one another. The intention is to maintain a relative sense of balance within and between the houses' populations. Doing so also provides social opportunities for marginalized students to combat feelings of anonymity (Dierenfield, 1975).

Developing a sense of identity within the house is important. Each house, rather than separate and tracked academic entities, ultimately creates its own identity and culture grounded in the ethos of the greater school. Green (2006) stated,

Houses reflect the school's diversity, encompassing students of various races, ethnicities, ages, and academic abilities. Teachers and staff members are assigned to houses to encourage stronger relationships between adults and students. [These] social houses have the potential to lessen [student] anxiety...and reduce insecurities. At the same time, engaging in house activities can harness and enhance some of the more positive attributes of early adolescence, such as students' burgeoning idealism and interest in the world. (p. 65)

In his study, Green (2006) sought the development of school community as the primary goal in implementing the house system model where the trickle-down effects of new friendships, civic awareness, and overall identity would result as well. The effects of this intervention were also seen in improved

academic results in the classroom, positive attitudes of responsibility to one's community, and a sense that the seeds of a lifelong commitment to the greater society had been planted.

In summation, research has shown the house system's effects on school climate and school community as primarily positive. Nixon, Launay-Fallasse, and Watts (2010) stated that schools using the house system model find "the relationships that are built get at the root of school culture and transform critical constructs that are foundational for learning" (p. 27). Though typically associated with large secondary schools, the concept of smaller community-based units can be applied to most educational organizations. "Strong cultures provide for the internal cohesion that makes it easier for teachers to teach, student to learn, and for parents, administrators, and others to contribute to the instructional process" (Deal & Kennedy, 1983, p. 15). Throughout its history, the house system has demonstrated its unique ability to foster community among diverse populations, to provide for the pastoral needs of students, and to generate opportunities that transmit a sense of belonging within the culture and identity of the school.

### Method

Survey instruments were administered to each group before and after the implementation of the house system to determine if a statistically significant change occurred in their perceptions pre- and post-intervention. Two focus groups, student and teacher, were also conducted using a semi-structured approach to gain similar insights of stakeholder perspectives.

### Program Description

In the spring of 2010, Most Holy Trinity Catholic School leadership was searching for new and innovative ways to connect the community of the school more closely. After exhaustive research and review of educational literature and Church documents, a house system unique to the needs and environment of the school was born. The specific framework and implementation of the house system typically reflects the type of school: all boys, all girls, co-ed, highly diverse, large, small, boarding, and so forth. Ultimately, however, the underlying purpose of all house systems remains the same: to foster unity, community, and, pastoral relationships among students and faculty.

The first step in the process of designing and implementing the house

system at Most Holy Trinity Catholic School was to develop a House Coordinating Committee commissioned with the task of determining the precise structure of the intervention as well as how best to communicate it to the rest of the stakeholders involved. A group of six faculty members spent the first several months of the school year studying existing models and establishing a flexible design suited to the needs of Most Holy Trinity Catholic School. Input from other teachers and students was collected and the final blueprint was unveiled to the faculty and staff as a whole during a special meeting.

The Most Holy Trinity Catholic School house system was unique in that it responded to the school's identity as a preschool through eighth grade Catholic elementary school. The school was divided vertically into four smaller, multi-age and multi-grade houses for faith sharing, Scripture study, camaraderie, mild competition, and various other school-wide activities. Each of the four houses was named after one of the four Evangelists of the New Testament's Gospels, and thus spawned the emergence of the St. Matthew Angels, St. Mark Lions, St. Luke Oxen, and St. John Eagles houses.

All students, faculty, and staff, as well as the parish priests and religious sisters, were carefully assigned to houses where they would remain for the duration of their tenure at the school. Close attention was paid to keep biological families intact by assigning siblings to the same house, as well as students from different grades known by the House Coordinating Committee to have already well-developed relationships with one another so as to bear witness and highlight to others the benefit of vertical social interactions. Each of the four houses was then divided further into families, or smaller social units, comprised of 10-12 students and a single teacher chosen to serve as the family mentor. This design structure was intended to promote closer relationships and more intimate opportunities to exercise pastoral care.

From this point, a second committee was established. The House Directors Committee was comprised of four individuals, one from each house, whose responsibilities were to work together in mapping out the activities each house would be involved in throughout the remaining months of the school year. Developed at the request of the House Coordinating Committee to solicit greater buy-in and ownership through increased administrative involvement, this new group outlined each of the upcoming house meetings and subsequent activities and themes to coincide first with the liturgical seasons, and secondly with any special holidays or observances that may be present on the secular calendar. While competition has its positive attributes, the goal of the house system in general was to increase feelings and perceptions of community

spirit. Therefore, the House Directors Committee was developed in order for events and activities to be planned using a school-wide team approach model rather than allowing each house to operate independently. This would afford all students the opportunity to participate in similar experiences and prevent instances of “house envy” by ensuring a common thread was woven throughout the entire system.

Houses met weekly to engage in playful, team-building activities and to discuss and share reactions to the Gospel that would be read at the upcoming school Mass. Whole school activities involving all the houses were scheduled on an ongoing basis and included house lunches, pep rallies, field days, house Masses, praise and worship experiences, and special marquee events. Special efforts were also undertaken to infuse and integrate the house system into the design of the school’s student council so as to enhance the relationships between the leadership, responsibility, and the system itself.

### Participants

Student participants ( $n=72$ ) for the survey included 40 males and 32 females. The same students completed both the pre- and post-intervention surveys. Students were selected via a stratified sampling designed to generate a sample reflective of the greater student body in regard to age, gender, ethnicity, and years enrolled in the school. Student participants ranged from grades five through eight. Student participants had been enrolled at Most Holy Trinity Catholic School between one and 11 years ( $M=7.13$ -years enrolled;  $SD=.35$ ).

Ten students participated in a focus group. Student focus group participants were selected using purposeful sampling according to student dimensions of age, years of enrollment, gender, and ethnicity. Participants ranged from fifth to eighth grade. Students had been enrolled at Most Holy Trinity Catholic School between three and 11 years ( $M=6.75$ -years enrolled;  $SD=.90$ ).

Teacher participants ( $n=18$ ) for the survey included two males and 16 females. The same teachers completed both pre- and post-intervention surveys. Teacher participants had been employed at Most Holy Trinity Catholic School between one and 19 years ( $M=6.78$ -years employed;  $SD=1.28$ ). Teacher participants, representing 95% of the total teacher population of the school, were selected from a convenience sample of individuals who responded to the researcher’s invitation to participate in the study.

Six teachers participated in a focus group before and after the implementation of the house system. Teacher focus group participants were selected

from a convenience sample comprised of individuals who responded to the invitation to participate in the study. Teacher focus group participants had been employed at Most Holy Trinity Catholic School between one and 16 years ( $M=6.50$ -years employed;  $SD=2.54$ ).

### Instruments and Materials

An original survey consisting of a series of multiple choice and open-ended responses was used to assess students' perceptions and attitudes toward the school climate, sense of community, and Catholic identity prior to the implementation of the house system. The survey contained statements that asked participants to provide responses using a 4-point Likert scale with response options of *Strongly Disagree*, *Disagree*, *Agree*, and *Strongly Agree*. Statements such as "I feel a stronger connection to my class than to the school as a whole," required participants to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement in their response. The survey also contained two open-ended questions that facilitated a personal response. Participants responded to questions such as "In what ways does Most Holy Trinity Catholic School make me feel as if I'm part of a bigger family?"

An original survey consisting of a series of multiple choice and open-ended responses was used to assess teacher perceptions and attitudes toward the school climate. The survey contained statements that asked participants to provide responses using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*. Statements such as "I feel isolated in the grade I teach and not a part of the rest of the school" required participants to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement in their response. The survey also contained two open-ended questions that facilitated a personal response. Participants responded to questions such as "How does Most Holy Trinity Catholic School allow me to live my faith daily?"

An original interview protocol was developed for use in this study to engage students in questions regarding their attitudes and perceptions of community and Catholic identity. The semi-structured interview protocol consisted of six open-ended questions that addressed community and Catholic identity at Most Holy Trinity Catholic School. Participants were asked to respond to questions such as "Do you feel that Most Holy Trinity Catholic School is successful in expressing its identity as a Catholic school? Why or why not?" A follow-up to the original interview protocol using the same participants was executed three months later and contained similar open-ended questions as



the initial interview protocol.

A teacher focus group was executed identically to the student group where an original interview protocol was developed to engage teacher participants in responding to questions regarding their attitudes toward community and Catholic identity. The semi-structured interview protocol consisted of six open-ended questions that addressed community and Catholic identity at Most Holy Trinity Catholic School.

### **Design and Procedure**

Focus group interviews were conducted at Most Holy Trinity Catholic School in the library. Student interviews took place during lunch/recess while teacher interviews were held after school. All interviews were conducted by the researcher and identical consent/assent protocols were performed for each focus group participant as in the survey groups. Participants were seated in a round-table structure to help facilitate discussion. Interviews were recorded and lasted approximately 45 minutes. Pre-intervention surveys and focus groups were conducted in November 2010 and the follow-up surveys and interviews were completed by March 2011.

### **Findings**

#### **Inferential Statistics Results**

Inferential statistics were used to examine stakeholder responses to statements on the pre- and post-intervention survey instruments. Overall, in the case of the teacher participant sample, paired two-sample for means t-tests revealed a significant difference between the group's responses to 11 of the 13 statements of interest relative to four of the five major questions involved in this action research. No significant difference was revealed for two of the statements of interest. Similar t-tests were also conducted on student responses to pre- and post-intervention surveys that focused on four of the research questions guiding this study. The results of these tests revealed that for eight of the 15 statements of interest included in the survey a statistically significant difference existed, while such was not the case for seven of the statements.

Table 1

Teacher Pre- and Post-Intervention Survey Data (n = 18)  
with Item Means, Standard Deviations and t Statistic

Item	Teacher Survey #1		Teacher Survey #2		df	t-value
	M	SD	M	SD		
<b>Research Question 1</b>						
Know most students by name	3.50	0.71	3.67	0.59	17	-1.14
Developed relationships with students yet to teach	3.00	0.69	3.61	0.50	17	-3.72*
Maintained relationships with students previously taught	3.17	0.71	3.44	0.62	17	-2.56*
Feelings of isolation	2.10	0.73	1.39	0.61	17	4.12*
<b>Research Question 2</b>						
School-wide activities contribute to sense of community	3.33	0.59	3.61	0.50	17	-2.56*
Organizational structure is conducive to promoting community	3.11	0.47	3.83	0.38	17	-5.33*
<b>Research Question 4</b>						
Strong collegial relationships	3.28	0.57	3.67	0.49	17	-2.72*
Faculty works as a team	3.00	0.49	3.33	0.59	17	-2.38*
Feel respected by colleagues	3.33	0.49	3.44	0.51	17	-1.46
Feel valued by colleagues	3.17	0.38	3.39	0.50	17	-2.20*
<b>Research Question 5</b>						
School-wide activities strengthen Catholic Identity	3.28	0.67	3.66	0.49	17	-3.29*
Organizational structure is conducive to promoting Catholic Identity	3.28	0.57	3.78	0.43	17	-4.12*
School provides me opportunities to promote spiritual development of students	3.50	0.62	3.89	0.32	17	-2.72*

Note.\* p < .05. Research question 3 is not included because it is student-specific.

### Pre-intervention Focus Group Interviews

Qualitative data collected from the pre-intervention semi-structured interviews of teacher and student focus groups were analyzed using open coding techniques. Analysis of the data provided through these questions revealed three major themes: family atmosphere, prayer life of the school, and limited opportunities for interaction.

Table 2

Student Pre- and Post-Intervention Survey Data (n = 72) with Item Means, Standard Deviations and t Statistic

Item	Teacher Survey #1		Teacher Survey #2		df	t-value
	M	SD	M	SD		
Research Question 1						
Developed relationships with students not in my class	3.03	0.60	3.35	0.51	71	-3.54*
Maintained relationships with teachers	3.00	0.65	3.11	0.52	71	-1.18
Know the names of most students	3.17	0.79	3.28	0.65	71	-0.96
Know the names of most teachers	3.78	0.42	3.74	0.44	71	0.55
Opportunities to know past/future teachers	2.89	0.62	3.18	0.48	71	-3.05*
Research Question 2						
School-wide activities contribute to sense of community	3.11	0.52	3.36	0.56	71	-2.71*
Feel cared for by teachers	3.43	0.71	3.26	0.58	71	1.54
Feel valued and appreciated by teachers	3.29	0.59	3.22	0.59	71	0.66
Research Question 3						
Stronger sense of belonging to class than whole school	2.82	0.84	2.36	0.74	71	3.58*
Feel isolated in my class/grade from rest of school	1.90	0.73	1.94	0.75	71	-0.35
Research Question 5						
Greater promotion of Catholic identity school-wide than in my class	2.96	0.70	3.22	0.59	71	-2.48*
Most Holy Trinity offers me opportunities to grow spiritually	3.28	0.51	3.44	0.58	71	-1.88
Most Holy Trinity offers me opportunities outside of the classroom to develop my identity as a Catholic	3.07	0.74	3.47	0.58	71	-3.56*
I have opportunities to share and model my faith to others	3.15	0.49	3.33	0.56	71	-2.33*
I am prepared for school Masses	2.64	0.68	3.13	0.69	71	-2.72*

Note.\* p < .05. Research question 4 is not included because it is teacher-specific.

**Family atmosphere.** The most frequent responses to questions regarding the community of Most Holy Trinity Catholic School for both focus groups

related to participants' regard for the school's family atmosphere (23 text segments). Nearly all of those interviewed articulated an acute sense of family within the school's social culture. This majority often identified the school as an extension of their own family. One teacher captured this general sentiment when she stated,

Most Holy Trinity Catholic School is my home. In fact I probably spend more time here than I do at my own home. The school has become an integral part of my life. It's part of who I am, inseparable from anything else. When I close my eyes and think about what Most Holy Trinity Catholic School means to me, family is the first word that pops into my head. Not just because my own two children have been raised here, but because I consider every student, every parent and every faculty member a part of my bigger Most Holy Trinity Catholic School family. We're all here because of the common bond of our faith, and we're all here for one another just like a family should.

A student participant further affirmed the previous response when she commented on the collective care and responsibility the members of Most Holy Trinity Catholic School's community share for one another. She revealed,

When my mom was sick, the teachers and parents took turns cooking us dinner each night. They prepared meals for my dad, brother and sister and I, wrote us prayers and sometimes we even got dessert. It was really hard seeing my mom so weak all the time, but knowing that everyone was there for us and so willing to help really gave me strength. Not that I'd never seen it before, but this experience really made me realize what a real family is and what the members of a family need to do for each other. I love Most Holy Trinity Catholic School and I love my school family.

These teacher and student comments reflect the general appreciation and recognition of a strong community within the culture of Most Holy Trinity Catholic School.

**Prayer life of the school.** Both teachers and students provided numerous comments involving the prayer life of the school (19 text segments), thus suggesting the emergence of such as a dominant theme within the focus group interview dialogue. One student, an eighth grader, expressed his attitudes toward

the school's prayer life when he stated,

Even though we do it a lot and sometimes it can go on for a long time and I get distracted, I really love when we come together as a school and pray. We pray together on the basketball court in the morning and over the loud speaker before lunch, after lunch and at the end of the day. It always makes me feel good to stop no matter what we might be in the middle of and drop everything to pray. Like [Mr. B says] it's our time to talk to God, our time to listen and time to remember that we are loved. It reminds me that He is what is most important. I also really like Mass on Fridays. Coming together as a whole school and sitting with the younger students helps me to see the whole Body of Christ concept we're learning in religion class. It makes it all real.

A teacher echoed this attitude when she stated,

Most Holy Trinity Catholic School's prayer life is amazing. We pray together as a real family should. We pray with the students throughout the day and work hard to promote true leadership in them by providing opportunities to model Christian devotion to the other students...But we pray together as a faculty as well. Whether it's before our faculty meetings, going to adoration together or just dropping prayer notes to one another here and there, we all know we are connected in our faith through the activity of prayer. Sharing this common belief allows me to be me and at the same time holds me accountable to live as a good example of what Christ wants me to be...to the students and to each other.

These comments shared by both students and teachers reveal the significance of the prayer life of Most Holy Trinity Catholic School and the ways in which it strengthens the bonds of community.

**Limited opportunities for interaction.** When asked about the current one-class-per-grade organizational structure of the school, responses that mentioned limited opportunities for interaction dominated the conversation (14 text segments). Teachers identified these interactions on two levels: the first with regard to student opportunities for social interactions with peers beyond those in their current class/grade and the second in reference to their professional collegial relationships. As one teacher stated,

Most Holy Trinity Catholic School's small size, while in many ways conducive to building such a close and tight knit community, at the same time has some real limitations. In the classroom I see a number of students, who don't exactly fit the mold of the popular or mainstream, struggle to build meaningful relationships with other peers simply because they are stuck. They are with these kids, with this class, for as long as they attend the school...And if they don't adapt or assimilate they remain on the outside and can really suffer socially. As for teachers, we have no one to work with. I don't have another teacher in my grade to lesson plan with, bounce ideas off of, or seek advice. And because we don't necessarily have these kinds of relationships, professional not social, I think we don't do as good a job as we can working with the teachers above us or below us to ensure the students are ready for the next grade.

Student responses to the same question of organizational structure were less detailed but largely in line with the previous statement. One student remarked how,

We've all been together for so long that we're a lot like brothers and sisters...which is a good thing and makes us close, but then again we can also fight like brothers and sisters too. I can also see though how some kids can find it hard to fit in when they're different from what most of the other kids are like. I guess that could make building community kind of hard...or at least feeling like you're part of one.

A second student commented, "We don't really get a chance to hang out with our old teachers. I mean some of them aren't even here anymore, but we don't really even know the newer ones if they don't teach us." These statements reveal a general consensus shared by teachers and students that the organizational structure of the school, though positive in many regards, plays a significant role in stifling the further development of community at Most Holy Trinity Catholic School by placing limitations on opportunities for social and professional interaction.

### **Post-intervention Focus Group Interviews**

Qualitative data collected from the post-intervention semi-structured in-



interviews of teacher and student focus groups were analyzed using the same open coding techniques as pre-intervention interviews. Three major themes emerged through data analysis: faith sharing, limitations, and the need for more time for evaluation.

**Faith sharing.** When asked about the ways in which the house system contributed to opportunities for students and teachers to explore, develop, and share their Catholic faith, the majority of interview participants from both groups agreed that these occasions have increased dramatically since the intervention began. Twenty-two text segments were identified that pointed directly at the house system's success in unlocking doors that once prevented vertical faith-related articulation. One teacher stated,

The house system has definitely allowed me greater opportunities to share my faith with the students. No longer explicitly teaching religion in my role at the school, I now have the chance to both formally teach it as well as share my personal testimonies and experiences with the students in my house and my family. It's been great.

Another teacher made the additional comment that, "it has really been a nice and refreshing experience to interact with the older students about their faith in a more in-depth way and at a higher level than I'm typically used to in the primary grades." She also suggested that "Most Holy Trinity Catholic School is really living up to its name. We are truly living the Trinity, growing closer in our spirituality by sharing our faith and slowly lifting the restrictions of age on our relationships."

Students similarly expressed their enjoyment of the house system's approach to developing opportunities to share their faith with others. One seventh grader made the following comment regarding her fondness for small group discussions:

I love reading the Gospel in our families. It helps us to be more prepared for Mass and Father's questions but I like most how we can just talk about what it means without feeling the pressure of giving a wrong answer. We can share our thoughts and how we feel about the readings and at the same time it gives us the chance to help out and teach the younger kids and answer their questions.

The same student went on to say that she also feels these small group sharing

experiences have helped to strengthen her feelings of connectivity to more individuals in the school's community. "Even if you're shy and maybe intimidated, you can still get to know others, learn about the things they value and grow closer to them by just listening and observing them." These statements, among others, express the shared agreement among students and teachers regarding the house system's ability to increase vertical social interaction and provide a safe setting in which faith sharing can occur.

**Limitations.** Much like the results of the pre-intervention focus group interviews, the theme of limitations surfaced once again in follow-up interviews conducted after the house system had been in place for three months. Though this thematic label may indeed be identical, there was a slight variation in the nature of its context from one round of interviews to the other. This time, responses that included this particular theme of limitations (26 text segments) were directed at the school's one-class-per-grade organizational structure that inhibited interaction among students from various grade levels as they had earlier. Instead, even though students were now exposed to more than just their peers and homeroom teachers in a new social setting, such exposure was still limited to only one quarter of the overall school population, thus leaving them yearning for more. When illustrating this point, one teacher stated,

While I think we can all agree that we enjoy our time planning activities with our fellow house parents, it's just that—only with our particular house parents. And while what's happening is certainly a good thing and better than before, I think it's important to note that we still have a ways to go to really increase exposure and build community with all the students and teachers in the school. So while I've gotten closer with the other teachers in my house and particularly the students in my family, we've got some work to do among the houses as a whole. I'm not expecting every single person in the school to become best friends or anything, that's obviously unrealistic, but we might be able to create more ways for the houses themselves to interact with one another in the future.

This very sentiment was echoed by several students and highlighted by one particular response where a student said that she "sometimes feels stuck," indicating that her house system experience had essentially been restricted to only those students and teachers in her house and was not as inclusive of the remaining population as she would have liked. She went on to suggest that

perhaps students could rotate house placements annually or better yet have entirely new rosters developed each year in an effort to provide more equitable exposure to other students and members of the faculty and staff.

**Need for continued evaluation.** Emerging at some point in nearly every question asked in the post-intervention interviews was the asserted need for the continued assessment of the house system's impact as well as the subsequent modifications such objective evaluations would render. The majority of teachers, excited and eager to continue with the intervention, made clear that though they might have been able to answer some of the questions with significant levels of confidence, several others require a lengthier period of time in which to experience and be immersed in the program. "I just think it might be too early to tell," said one teacher when responding to the question seeking to gain insight to the heightened presence of collegiality among faculty and staff. "We've only been at this for three months, and though it's been positive in nearly every way, we really need some more time to truly experience the fruits of our labor." A second teacher amplified this sentiment when she made the following statement:

Some of these kids have been together for nine or ten years, since preschool, and have grown up in a system void of the kind of opportunities we're providing them now. Many of them might not even know how to react or respond. It's different for them, this change. We've seen some wonderful things happen already and once we give it a little more time and get over this initial hump of "doing something new" it will become a more concrete part of our school's culture and we can really begin measuring results. Assessing things right now is difficult- we're still in the middle of creating it and seeing what works and what doesn't.

Students, too, felt that in order to reveal if considerable changes in attitudes relative to community and Catholic identity were present as a result of the house system, more exposure to this school-level intervention would be needed. One student captured this feeling when he commented,

There are a lot of cool things house has been doing for us. We're making new friends, meeting new teachers, studying the Gospel. But it's still really new and I'm excited to see what happens down the road when it really gets going becomes more of the norm at school.

### Summary of Findings

The data from this mixed-method action research project revealed important changes in stakeholder perceptions of community and Catholic identity at Most Holy Trinity Catholic School as a consequence of the implementation of a house system into the social structure and dynamic of the school. Both teachers and students, via the results and analysis of survey and semi-structured focus group interviews, indicated a statistically significant increase of both characteristics as a result of the intervention. The implications of these findings are discussed in the following section.

### Discussion and Extension

Survey results brought to light several statistically significant changes to both teacher and student stakeholder groups' perspectives on the house system's impact on community development and the enhancement of Catholic identity at the school. Focus group interviews also revealed meaningful insights to changes in attitudes.

**Vertical, cross-grade relationships.** Results of teacher surveys revealed positive trends in levels of agreement as they pertained to the state of vertical relationships within the community. Teachers in general indicated an increase in student familiarity as measured by their responses to statements involving their ongoing development of relationships with former students as well as their emerging relationships with students they have yet to teach. Teachers also indicated a significant decrease in feelings of professional isolation as a result of the vertical nature of the house system's design that focuses on cross-grade integration. Teachers indicated substantial gains in these categories, and as a result felt more connected to the school community as a whole. The concept of vertical integration and inclusion with respect to school climate enhanced and enriched via engaging house-related activities led to a more cohesive climate from the perspective of the school's educators.

**Students indicated similar attitudes of vertical connectedness.** This was revealed through their increased agreement levels concerning the development of relationships with students not presently in their classes. Agreement levels also rose concerning opportunities for students to both maintain relationships with former teachers as well as develop new relationships with those teachers to whom they have yet to be exposed.

Clearly, the component of the house system that focuses on the commu-

nal aspect of school culture achieved a major component of this intervention's goal. Moving forward, it is this researcher's recommendation that the vertical structure of the house system's design be maintained and all activities embedded in such continue to focus on the facet involving the growth and strengthening of community.

**Community perceptions.** Similar to the responses of the previous research question, teacher and student agreement levels showed statistically significant increases regarding the question of stakeholders' overall perceptions of community at Most Holy Trinity Catholic School; primarily as a result of new school-wide activities generated through the house system as well as the opportunities for interaction provided through its new social organizational structure.

Since the inception and execution of the house system, participants have encountered more positive experiences of overall school climate, and their feelings of connectivity, both on individual and class/grade levels, have increased. Teacher and student data revealed significant escalations in agreement levels related to school-wide activities and their subsequent contributions to a closer community spirit. Teachers specifically noted that the house system's emphasis on the vertical arrangement of student and teacher interactions has assisted in providing a more conducive context in which to grow and develop the school's sense of community. Therefore, it is this researcher's opinion that the vertical structure of the house system remains intact. Future efforts should be made to increase the frequency and spectrum of school-wide activities relative to the house system in order to further promote its permeation into the very essence of the school's culture and climate in order to support positive and enhanced community-related outcomes.

**Identity and allegiance.** Tapping once more into the community aspect of this action research, the third research question sought to explore student identity and allegiance. Student responses regarding which entity—class/grade or school—they most align themselves with changed significantly between pre- and post-intervention surveys. Initially, student loyalty resided within the sphere of their peer groups and classrooms. However, after three months of participation in the house system, a major shift in these attitudes and sentiments took place. Many students now saw themselves as part of an even greater collective that included the school as a whole, and no longer considered the parameters for their school relationships to be the contents within their classroom walls.

While this may have been a positive trend, unfortunately no statistically

significant difference surfaced with regard to matters of student isolation. The question sought to glean insight from socially marginalized students residing at the periphery of their classroom's social structures and hierarchies. It intended to reveal whether the house system provided an effective outlet and venue by which these feelings of isolation would lessen and conversely students' sense of belonging would increase. The absence of a statistically significant change could very well have been the result of the method by which data was collected and analyzed in this particular action research. Instead of identifying and focusing specifically on the responses of those students experiencing feelings of isolation, responses to this question were measured within the context of the entire participant sample. Thus, data that could potentially highlight the changing perceptions of a particular group were possibly diluted by that of the majority. As such, it is the recommendation of this researcher that a significant portion of future house system efforts be designated to meet the needs of this specific group of students. Explicit research should be conducted on how the house system impacts student isolation and marginalization.

**Collegial relationships.** The fourth major research question guiding this study focused on the house system's influence on enhancing the professional collegial relationships among Most Holy Trinity Catholic School's teachers. Three of the four sub-questions related to this major theme revealed statistically significant changes in teacher agreement levels from the time pre-intervention surveys were administered to when post-intervention surveys were conducted. In general, teachers indicated an increase in their feelings associated with the strength of their professional relationships, their actions and activities working together as a team, and their sense of feeling valued by their coworkers. This is in no doubt a direct consequence of the close interaction required of these educators by the house system in order for it to run and function effectively. Focus group interviews suggested teacher objectives relative to the success of the intervention were indeed geared toward generating positive student outcomes; however, it is clear that a byproduct of this intervention was the formation of tighter and stronger bonds among faculty members as a whole. Instead of operating within independent silos void of cross-grade level articulation and interaction, through the house system, teachers were exposed to the skill sets, efficacies, and dependencies of and for one another on a more professional level than that of a merely social nature as in past circumstances.

**Catholic identity.** The final major research question of this study saw a shift from stakeholder community perspectives to those centered on Catholic identity. Both participant groups exhibited statistically significant changes in



their responses to survey questions before and after the implementation of the house system. Teacher participants revealed significant changes to all three sub-questions within this category and students responded similarly to four of the five sub-questions asked. Overall, participants revealed through general consensus that the house system made noteworthy strides in enhancing the Catholic identity of Most Holy Trinity Catholic School. The new school-wide activities developed under the auspice of the house system were done so with the explicit intention of promoting and fostering the Catholic faith of the faculty and students involved. Weekly house meetings, with their emphasis on Scripture, its meaning, implications, and personal responses to such, increased the opportunities to teach and share the faith on a vertical level and allowed students and teachers to grow closer to one another within the context of the Catholic religion. Preparation for school Masses, increased accountability for modeling the expectations of the faith, and growing spiritually as a community all served as major components involved in the planning and execution of house activities, while simultaneously producing positive outcomes. Therefore, it is this researcher's recommendation that this particular aspect of the house system continues and deepens as it has played a major role in enhancing the Catholic identity of the teachers, students, and the school as a whole.

### Focus Group Interviews

Pre-intervention interviews yielded many positive responses to interviewees' attitudes regarding the present conditions of both the community and Catholic identity of Most Holy Trinity Catholic School. The majority of comments reflected stakeholders' widely shared beliefs in the strong community of the school as a consequence of its small size. Stakeholders further suggested that this communal atmosphere was heightened due to the fervent prayer life of the school and thus consequently proved a compelling and complementary force in the nature and prevalence of Most Holy Trinity Catholic School's Catholic identity. Limitations discussed in these interviews concentrated on those associated with the school's one-class-per-grade organizational structure and the social constraints that accompany it such as restricted interactions with students and teachers from different grade levels and narrow portals for other means of vertical articulation both socially and professionally.

However, after a 3-month exposure to and engagement within the house system at Most Holy Trinity Catholic School, several new themes and new insights into preexisting themes surfaced. One such theme in this new pool

of responses was highlighted by participants' newfound joy with respect to opportunities for faith sharing among both faculty and students. Considering that all house system activities emerged from a faith-based origin, and were centered on either scriptural or liturgical themes, it was no wonder that opportunities to discuss and share individual thoughts and feelings relative to spirituality, as well as the added excitement and pleasure in doing so, emerged as a major theme in these interviews. Teachers who did not explicitly teach religion in their present professional roles in the school were delighted to have the opportunity to do so with the other students and teachers in their respective houses and families. Students specifically remarked on their newly accepted levels of personal accountability to model Christ-like behavior and their call to provide pastoral care to their fellow house and family members, in particular the younger ones.

The theme of limitations was also discussed in post-intervention interviews as it had been earlier. However, rather than involving the limitations mentioned earlier in relation to the organizational structure of the school on a macro level, both teachers and students still found limitations on a micro level inherent in the design of the house system. While all agreed that the new intervention had done wonders in breaking down many of the vertical barriers associated with grade-level segregation, many still felt limited within the context of their houses and families. These social units had been carefully selected and chosen by a house system coordinating committee and remained consistent and rigid with respect to their rosters throughout the intervention's implementation. Consequently, even with a current student population now distributed more than it had ever been before, individuals still felt that assigned houses and families were a restriction on their ability to interact with the entire school community. Thus, while the house system certainly made strides in opening the doors to increased social interaction for the members of the Most Holy Trinity Catholic School community, there is still work to be done to develop further access to one another and draw closer on communal levels school-wide.

Given the previous discussion, several suggestions were provided for possible incorporation into the house system's future design. For example, one thought shared by several participants included the annual reassignment of houses or families within houses. This is just one aspect of the interview's overall dialogue that gave rise to its third most prevalent theme: the need for more time to assess the outcomes of the program, whereby concerns would be addressed and changes enacted to make the program more successful. Teachers

and students agreed that they truly enjoyed their participation in the house system, but felt that after only three months it may be too early to evaluate its overall success and determine the necessary changes its direction should take for the future. Considering this, it is this researcher's recommendation that dialogue continue with teacher and student focus groups in an effort to reveal concerns and discuss potential changes for the benefit of the house system and the overall community spirit of Most Holy Trinity Catholic School.

### **Application of Results**

This action research revealed that many of the house system's outcomes result in significant positive changes within the school's social environment—namely, its community spirit. Also, while most research involving house systems involves secondary schools and schools with large student and faculty populations, infusing such a model can be especially important when considering smaller schools with low student populations, especially if the organizational structure is established in a way that fails to nurture, and rather discourages, close relationships between students and teachers (Dierenfield, 1975). This study has attempted to lay down more tracks on the bridge that spans the gap of house system research in that its context for study has been both a primary school as well as one small in population.

This action research project has revealed numerous benefits to incorporating the house system into the overall social organizational structure of Most Holy Trinity Catholic School—most concretely evidenced by enhancements to the dimensions of community spirit and Catholic identity. As such, it is the recommendation of this researcher that the program remain as an integral part of the school's social operation and that its governing committees continue to evaluate its success through surveys and focus group interviews designed to extract both general and specific insights to the intervention. Changes and adjustments should be made on a regular basis as feedback warrants.

### **Study Limitations**

Two specific limitations were noted in the completion of this study. The first of these limitations involves the survey instruments themselves—specifically, those administered to the students and the language used within them. Upon conducting the survey and after thoroughly reading student responses, it was clear that several of the students were challenged by the language and vo-

cabulary used in the instruments. Many times students had raised their hands to ask for an explanation or clarification regarding a particular statement to which they were being asked to indicate their level of agreement. Consequently, student reading comprehension may have impacted the validity of their responses. Future instruments designed to reveal stakeholder insights to the effects of the house system will be designed with more age-appropriate language so as to solicit the most accurate response and provide more reliable data and pilot-tested with a small student group before full administration.

The second limitation of this study was the short duration of the intervention period. Measuring stakeholders' perceptions of community and Catholic identity, two intangible and non-concrete items, require a significant lapse of time between pre- and post-intervention surveys and interviews. Though strong responses and data had indeed been extracted in just three months, it would prove far more telling and insightful to study results over an even greater span of time between data collections. Doing so would have permitted the house system to develop deeper roots within the community dimension of Most Holy Trinity Catholic School.

### Conclusion

Designing and implementing this action research study with the teacher and student stakeholder groups of Most Holy Trinity Catholic School proved an insightful and rewarding process. With a personal educational philosophy embedded in, and derived from, the cultural and communal ethos of the Catholic school, asking participants to share their thoughts, feelings, and attitudes regarding such as viewed through the lens of the house system has been a tremendous professional experience. Witnessing firsthand the development of new relationships among students, teachers, and administration and the subsequent emergence of a stronger overall school community has given rise to three future areas in which to study the continued implementation of the house system at Most Holy Trinity Catholic School. These future action research studies would involve designing detailed methods targeted at the following questions: How can the house system play a role in impacting student achievement? How can the house system impact student behavior and discipline? And lastly, how can the house system impact student attitudes of accountability and personal responsibility to the greater community?

In conclusion, both the spirit and ethos of a school emanate from its very heart and serve to generate the compressions responsible for its sustain-

ability. It is within this potent concoction of our Catholic identity and the strength and character of our communities founded in Jesus Christ that our schools not only receive life but in turn share it with the greater Catholic community. The two are inseparable components to the continued success of all Catholic educational institutions and must be nourished and cared for so as to perpetuate the good news they spread.

### References

- Bryk, A. S., Lee, V. E., & Holland, P. B. (1993). *Catholic schools and the common good*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Congregation for Catholic Education. (1988). *The religious dimension of education in a Catholic school*. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference.
- Congregation for Catholic Education. (1998). *The Catholic school on the threshold of the third millennium*. Boston, MA: Pauline Books and Media. (Original work published 1997)
- Cook, T. J. (2001). *Architects of Catholic culture: Designing and building Catholic culture in Catholic schools*. Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association.
- Deal, T. E., & Kennedy, A. A. (1983). Culture and school performance. *Educational Leadership*, 40(5), 14-15.
- Dierenfield, R. B. (1975). Personalizing education: The house system in England. *The Phi Delta Kappa*, 56(9), 605-607.
- Dierenfield, R. B. (1976). The house system in comprehensive schools: Its current status. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 24(1), 5-11.
- Grace, G. R., & O'Keefe, J. (2007). *International handbook of Catholic education: Challenges for school systems in the 21st century*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Greeley, A. M. (1990). *The Catholic myth: The behavior and beliefs of American Catholics*. New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Green, D. G. (2006). Welcome to the house system. *Educational Leadership*, 63(7), 64-67.
- Groome, T. (1996). What makes a school Catholic? In T. McLaughlin, J. O'Keefe, & B. O'Keefe (Eds.). *The contemporary Catholic school: Context, identity and diversity* (pp. 107-126). Washington, DC: Falmer Press.
- Heft, J. L., S M, & Davidson, J. D. (2003). The mission of Catholic high schools and today's millennials: Three suggestions. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, 6(4), 410-422.
- Hooper, H. H. (1999, March). *Restructuring the schools learning arrangement into communities*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Center for the Study of Small/Rural Schools, Memphis, TN.
- Nixon, A., Launay-Fallasse, C., & Watts, N. (2010). There will never be a housing crisis at Our Lady of Mercy high school: Implementation of the house system leads to higher enrollment and better school climate. *Momentum*, 41(3), 24-27.
- Oxley, D. (1994). Organizing schools into small units: Alternatives to homogeneous grouping. *Phi Delta Kappa*, 75(7), 521-526.

- Pius XI. (1930). *Divini illius magistri [On Christian education]*. Washington, DC: National Catholic Welfare Conference. (Original work published 1929)
- Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education. (1977). *The Catholic school*. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference.
- Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education. (1982). *Lay Catholics in schools: Witnesses to faith*. Boston, MA: St. Paul Editions.
- Schein, E. H. (1992). *Organizational culture and leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Vatican Council II. (1965). *Gravissimum educationis [Declaration on Christian education]*. Washington, DC: National Catholic Welfare Conference.

*Michael C. Brennan is currently the Director of Schools for the Rochester Catholic School in Rochester, Minnesota. Mr. Brennan served as principal of Most Holy Trinity Catholic School where this research took place. He is a graduate of the Mary Ann Remick Leadership Program at the University of Notre Dame. Correspondence for this article should be sent to Michael Brennan at mbrennan@rochestercatholic.k12.mn.us.*