

Proceedings from the National Convening on Disabilities and Catholic Education



**May 20-22, 2025
Saint Louis University**

National Convening on Disabilities and Catholic Education

From May 20 to 22, 2025, Saint Louis University proudly hosted a groundbreaking national convening focused on advancing the inclusion of students with disabilities in Catholic education. This inaugural event brought together a diverse and dedicated assembly of 85 participants, including parents, diocesan superintendents, Catholic school principals, national leaders from Catholic organizations, policy makers, university faculty, and representatives from philanthropic foundations.

United by a shared commitment to the mission of Catholic education and the dignity of every learner, attendees engaged in a dynamic series of presentations and structured dialogues. These collaborative efforts culminated in the identification of key priorities and actionable strategies to strengthen the capacity of Catholic schools to serve students with disabilities. The proceedings that follow capture the insights, recommendations, and collective vision that emerged from this historic gathering.

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The National Convening on Disability and Catholic Education was a significant three-day working session held at Saint Louis University from May 20-22, 2025. Hosted by the Herrmann Center for Innovative Catholic Education at the School of Education, this pioneering event brought together key stakeholders from across the Catholic education community, including parents, superintendents, principals, teachers, funders, and policymakers.

The primary aim of the convening was to address the critical need to build the capacity of Catholic schools to educate students with disabilities, a mission deeply rooted in the Catholic teaching of upholding the unique dignity of every individual. Despite the absence of legal mandates and federal funding that apply to public schools, Catholic schools are increasingly responding to the Church's call to serve students with disabilities.

Key objectives of the conference included:

- **Creating a Shared Vision:** Uniting stakeholders around a common vision for inclusive Catholic education, guided by Catholic teachings and values.
- **Developing a National Agenda:** Crafting a comprehensive national agenda with specific goals, strategies, and action steps to enhance the education of students with disabilities in Catholic schools.
- **Addressing Challenges and Opportunities:** Identifying the unique challenges faced by Catholic schools in this endeavor and pinpointing opportunities for growth.
- **Mobilizing Resources:** Exploring potential resources such as financial support, professional development, and technical assistance to implement the national agenda.

The Ignatian Roundtable Experience was a core component of the National Convening on Disability and Catholic Education, designed to foster insightful and collaborative discussions rooted in Ignatian pedagogy. This unique format aimed to engage participants deeply with the conference's guiding questions through structured conversation. It involves an initial "HOME table" discussion where groups explore a topic and capture key ideas, followed by an "AWAY table" round where participants share takeaways and reflect on broader themes, generating new insights. This dynamic process encourages active participation and collective wisdom, ensuring a rich and meaningful exchange of perspectives among all attendees. The process was well received, as reported by participants, and participation was thoughtful and very active.

Each speaker session was followed by Ignatian roundtable sessions and had an assigned facilitator that helped to keep the discussion focused and to ensure that the discussions were recorded on chart paper. The narrative presented here is the product of synthesis of the participants' dialog and collaborations that were exhibited throughout the convening.

Session One: Introduction to the Convening and Critical Issues: Michael Boyle

*Dr. Boyle offered a map for implementation of the inclusionary journey in Catholic schools. He challenged that the journey must be embedded with the “why” of the importance of educating students with disabilities in Catholic schools. To this end, the challenge is to reframe professional development as **professional formation**, to emphasize the need to develop both faith dispositions and professional competencies.*

Roundtable discussion question included:

What practical steps can Catholic school leaders, teachers, and parents take to promote a more inclusive and equitable educational environment for students with disabilities?

How can we leverage the strengths and resources of the Catholic community to support students with disabilities and their families? What opportunities exist for collaboration between Catholic schools, parishes, and diocesan structures to enhance special education programs?

The responses highlight several major themes across practical steps, community leveraging, and collaboration opportunities.

Promoting Inclusive and Equitable Educational Environments (Practical Steps)

A central theme is the importance of a fundamental shift in disposition and mission. Participants emphasized that Catholic schools should minister to the "whole child" and recognize that their mission is not to be elite private schools, but rather "Catholic + Whole Child Ed.". This involves starting with a "Yes" mentality, hosting conversations, removing barriers through universal design, and continuously asking questions to begin foundational work to support inclusive education in our systems

Practical steps for leaders, teachers, and parents include:

- **Awareness and Education:** Increasing awareness among all stakeholders, including clergy, teachers, and community members, about the mission and vision of inclusion. This also involves educating school and church leadership and overcoming fear through education.
- **Teacher and Staff Support:** Providing teacher training on systems, especially referrals and interventions. This includes filling the "teacher toolbox" with resources, helping teachers recognize existing skills and tools, and ensuring staff is aligned with the inclusive mission. There's a call for professional development (PD), as well as professional formation, for educators, including teaching the whole team at once (administrators, teachers, RCIA directors).
- **Parental Involvement and Support:** Promoting more organization among parents to pray, share resources, and create support systems. Informing parents on processes to identify and serve special needs students, and creating parent support groups, advocacy,

and research initiatives. Parents are seen as a great resource for identifying what has worked, and their expertise should be leveraged.

- **Systemic and Cultural Changes:** Creating a clear plan and vision, fostering a culture of collaboration, and systematizing processes with common language. Defining and utilizing quality Tier I instruction and embracing models like MTSS, RTI, and UDL are crucial. Removing fear by naming, claiming, and determining its source is also highlighted. The need for a "both/and mindset" was also noted.
- **Liturgical and Parish Inclusion:** Emphasizing that embracing individuals with disabilities needs to happen at the pulpit, with pastors and parishes leading the way. Inclusive opportunities should be modeled by the priest, and children with disabilities should be sought and welcomed into all faith-related spaces. Normalizing the presence of all children in the parish community is key.
- **Common Messaging and Leadership:** Starting with common messaging from the top, and ensuring leadership buy-in. There is a need to understand the mission and recognize that inclusion is not "something else" but inherent to Catholic identity. The default response to inclusion should not be "no". This is comments was made repeatedly across participants in the various groups.

Leveraging Strengths and Resources of the Catholic Community

The Catholic community's strengths and resources can be leveraged in various ways:

- **Pastoral Leadership:** The pastor is seen as central, with inclusion being part of the school's fabric and how schools are run. Bishops and archbishops are crucial in changing the hearts of community members, and efforts should "start with the Bishop/Archbishop". Pulpit talks and spreading the word about pro-life encompassing the whole child are important.
- **Formation and Education:** Formation of seminarians and a "human formation piece" for lay individuals are identified as resources. This involves listening and forming/educating parents.
- **Collaboration and Networking:** Increasing communication and collaboration between Catholic schools regularly and systemizing this to fully utilize resources. Celebrating and recognizing schools that do inclusive work well and inviting people to witness these successes can empower others. Sharing resources, including authors within the community, is also encouraged. Partnerships with Catholic Higher Education are highlighted.
- **Parental and Community Resources:** Parents are explicitly mentioned as a resource, and the interest of older people who knew children who couldn't attend Catholic schools is a potential source of support. Community support is vital.
- **Financial and Practical Resources:** Allocation of budget, pooling services, and considering proportionate share are practical resource considerations. The "One Classroom University" initiative in the Archdiocese of St. Louis is presented as an example of providing funding and setting up fundraisers. There was great hope expressed among participants that vouchers could have a powerful impact on enrolling more students with disabilities.

- **Mission Alignment:** Framing inclusion through messaging that "touches hearts" and aligns with doctrine and scripture. Service in inclusion is described as Catholic identity.

Opportunities for Collaboration between Catholic Schools, Parishes, and Diocesan Structures

Collaboration is a recurring theme for enhancing special education programs:

- **Structured Collaboration:** Establishing an organizing structure to ensure sustainability. This includes connecting early adopters, highlighting successes, and then focusing on base building and growth. There's a call to "de-silo" at an institutional level.
- **Diocesan Leadership and Initiatives:** Diocesan structures can facilitate a shared vision articulated consistently across schools. Initiatives like "One Classroom University," which partners with universities, demonstrate successful collaboration. The Archdiocese of St. Louis's "One Classroom" provides funding and facilitates school-level fundraisers.
- **Inter-Institutional Partnerships:** Forming partnerships between institutions to advance the mission, including collaboration with other dioceses.
- **Common Language and Processes:** Developing a common language and systematizing processes to ensure sustained effort through change.
- **Direct Engagement:** Direct conversations with key stakeholders, such as board members, bishops, pastors, and principals.
- **Visibility and Best Practices:** Visiting schools and communities that are already inclusive to see best practices in action. Gatherings at the local level to advocate and raise awareness of needs are also suggested.

Outlier Responses/Areas of Concern:

One notable outlier or area of concern highlighted is the challenge posed by "anti-school choice people" and teacher unions who use special needs children as an argument against school choice bills, claiming that schools "can't serve all kids, kids with IEPs". This suggests an external, adversarial dynamic that needs to be addressed.

Another concern is the potential for "too much too fast" when school choice brings more students than a school can handle. This emphasizes the importance of building capacity in advance of school choice implementation.

The trend of "inclusion" being seen as "off mission" when associated with school choice, similar to past fears around poverty or racial differences, is also mentioned as a challenge to overcome. Additionally, the divide among leaders regarding inclusive practices (some still wanting "separate but equal") needs to be addressed to alleviate fear.

Finally, the observation that "Even if children don't have a disability, all kids are different" and the need for admissions to be pastoral because parents are "broken" from going from school to school emphasize the deep personal impact of current challenges and the critical need for a more trusting and welcoming system.

Session Two: A Schema for Catholic School Inclusion: Center Christ, Nurture Culture, Build Capacity: Martin Scanlon

Dr. Scanlan challenged that participants there is a need to view the work of inclusion in Catholic schools, not as sole candles “burning” not in isolations, but as collective fire to ensure that the world is “set on fire.” Dr. Scanlan argued that to transform our Catholic schools to be inclusive, we need to develop a more robust, holistic, and productive schema. He presented a version of such a schema with three components: centering Christ, nurturing culture, and building capacity.

Roundtable discussion question included:

What are 1-3 specific ways this helps you think about actions to advance inclusion within Catholic schools and amongst schools in dioceses and networks?

What are some ideas for helping key stakeholders in the social ecosystem (students, teachers, administrators, board members, parents, parishioners) develop their schema for Catholic school inclusion in the short-term (in the coming school year) and medium-term (over the next 2-3 years)?

This synthesis addresses actions to advance inclusion in Catholic schools and diocese and strategies for developing a shared understanding among stakeholders.

Actions to Advance Inclusion

Participants identified several keyways to advance inclusion, emphasizing a systemic and mission-driven approach. A primary takeaway is that inclusion is not "one more thing," but rather "THE thing", central to the Catholic identity and mission. This requires a culture shift from an "achievement culture" to one rooted in faith-based reasons for inclusion.

Specific actions include:

- **Developing a Unifying Framework and Common Language:** There is a strong call to create a common language, and common expectations grounded in Church teachings. This framework should be amplified across schools and the larger system, acting as a "visionary" statement of "who we are". It should be supported and built from the arch/diocesan level, and ideally, on a national level. This includes defining a mission statement that can be lived up to.
- **Celebrating Successes and Building Capacity:** Participants emphasized the importance of celebrating current success stories in schools and looking at model schools to build capacity within dioceses. This involves creating model schools, dioceses, and programs, then sharing these resources and ideas. The idea of "host" schools as exemplars and opportunities for people to experience them was also raised. This also includes recognizing and awarding schools that excel in inclusion.
- **Strategic Planning and Systemic Integration:** Advancing inclusion requires diocesan-wide strategic plans across all domains, adopting the same language and framework. The goal is to weave inclusion into the very fabric of the school's life, building organizational

capacity. This also involves focusing on intentionality and a top-down approach. Studying successful system-wide efforts and developing a baseline measurement tool for dioceses and schools can guide local plans.

Developing a Schema for Catholic School Inclusion Among Stakeholders

Ideas for helping various stakeholders develop their schema for Catholic school inclusion, in both the short and medium term, revolve around ongoing formation, transparency, and intentional communication and collaboration.

Short-Term (In the Coming School Year):

- **Define Mission and Share Roadmaps:** Ask diocesan and school levels to define their mission of inclusion and state what they are currently doing. Start conversations and share roadmaps by bringing people together.
- **Address Fear and Share Stories:** Name the fears associated with inclusion. Share origin and impact stories of individuals who have benefited from inclusion. This includes showcasing joyful stories of real people. Telling the "why" behind inclusion (the mission) is vital.
- **Educate and Provide Resources:** Educate everyone: administrators, teachers, parents, and students. Provide lists of available resources. Share Catholic school materials that reflect the diversity of learners.
- **Embrace "Yes" and Model Behavior:** Equip leaders to make a declaration: "We are an inclusive school". Encourage the attitude of "Yes! & figure it out". Model inclusion through a focus on presence, attitude, and welcoming, rather than segregating students.
- **Form Leadership Cohorts:** Get cohorts of principals on the same page, collaborating, and presenting a united front. This also includes providing support for clergy, as inclusion is not typically part of their curriculum.

Medium-Term (Over the Next 2-3 Years):

- **Ongoing Formation and Professional Development:** Implement an ongoing calendar of conversations and communication. Provide continuous professional development and exposure for teachers and administrators, teaching and showing them best practices. This includes intentional professional formation in a collaborative way and training teachers to train other teachers.
- **Transparency on Barriers:** Foster transparency regarding barriers at the national, arch/diocesan, school, and classroom levels.
- **Strengthening Relationships and Networks:** Encourage the creation of networks for support to promote the justice dimension of inclusion. Foster relationships between bishops and encourage networking with organizations, universities, and USCCB. Formalize collaboration between districts, schools, universities, and non-profit organizations.
- **Sustained Advocacy and Community Engagement:** Lobby and galvanize the movement by reaching out to outside stakeholders, like Special Olympics. Celebrate inclusion with the same enthusiasm as athletics. Put the commitment to inclusion in print

through an inclusion statement. Listen to parents and get people with disabilities involved to understand pain points.

- **Integration into Church and School Culture:** Weave inclusion into the entire Catholic community, not just school families or staff. Ensure parish models the same values and educate pastors where needed. Consider subsidiarity in determining what makes sense at the school/parish vs. diocesan level.
- **Addressing Mindsets:** Help change the mindset of teachers who may have come to Catholic schools to avoid public school inclusion practices. Help those who understand inclusion to integrate it into strategic plans and communication.

Outlier Response/Areas of Concern:

During this session, an administrator's internal struggle with being "Mr. No" when presented with an example of child with a low-incidence disability at a college prep school, and the question of "how do you steward the common good?" was a unique perspective highlighting the difficult decisions leaders face. Additionally, the comment that "Some teachers come to Catholic schools because they are avoiding public schools, but that schema needs to change" points to a specific internal barrier related to teacher motivation and mindset.

Session Three: "Creating a Culture of Belonging: Time to Translate Possibility and Hope into Reality" -Tricia McGann

Tricia McGann offered a challenging perspective as both a Catholic school principal and as a parent with child with a disability. She spoke of the operational practicalities of running a school but also shared the realities and the unique affective perspective of a parent who must encounter these realities. Mrs. McGann urged the participants to remember the ministerial duty and to maintain the humanity of those that are served in a Catholic school.

Roundtable discussion question included:

Many institutions articulate a desire for "belonging," but what concrete, measurable actions can ensure this isn't just a slogan? How can we move beyond performative gestures and establish accountability for creating genuine belonging for all members of a community?

What existing policies, practices, or unspoken norms within our institutions actively undermine the creation of a culture of belonging? What uncomfortable truths must we confront to dismantle these barriers and foster a more inclusive environment?

This synthesis of this session identifies key themes and outlier perspectives regarding genuine inclusion in Catholic schools.

Defining and Measuring Belonging: A core theme is the need to move beyond rhetoric and establish concrete, measurable actions for belonging. This involves actively asking stakeholders, "Do you feel belonging?" through surveys, focus groups, and stakeholder presentations. The

feedback from these methods should lead to actionable steps, ensuring input is heard and used to identify best practices. Defining what belonging truly looks like is crucial, including considering who makes this definition. Measures of student growth and critical examination of a "college prep" mindset are also highlighted as important for accountability and a more inclusive environment.

Identifying and Dismantling Barriers to Belonging: Participants identified numerous policies, practices, and unspoken norms that undermine a culture of belonging:

- **Admissions and Marketing:** The application process, "weeding out" before registration, and marketing slogans like "All Are Welcome" that are not consistently applied are significant barriers. Saying "no" to a student can lead to the entire family leaving the school, the parish, and ultimately, the Church.
- **Discrimination and Exclusion:** Active discrimination against visible disabilities and the manifestation of invisible disabilities (like dyslexia) leading to students being asked to leave in later grades are noted. The high school admissions gap and lack of clear pathways for students with disabilities also create barriers.
- **Fear and Mindset:** Fear, often rooted in the unknown, is a pervasive barrier for parents, principals, teachers, and pastors. The "college prep" label, "high achieving," and "academics focused" terminology create unspoken norms that exclude. The mindset that "we need to do this like public schools" also presents a challenge. There is a need to replicate portions of this, but in a true Catholic manner.
- **Financial and Resource Concerns:** Increased tuition for students needing extra services, the notion that all children require a "one-on-one" (and its associated cost), and the perception that children with disabilities are "flawed" are significant financial and philosophical barriers. Inadequate general education teacher preparation is also a barrier.
- **Siloed Efforts and Lack of Accountability:** Efforts being "siloed" across states or institutions and a lack of honest reflection on who the schools truly are can hinder inclusion. There's a need for structures for accountability and individuals to implement inclusion plans.

Concrete Actions and Ideas for Broader Inclusion: To foster genuine belonging, several concrete actions and ideas were suggested:

- **Policy Changes:** Implementing policies to accept students living in poverty aligns with Catholic Social Teaching.
- **Mission Reorientation:** Reorienting the vision of Catholic education to focus on a "growth model" rather than solely "college prep," and fulfilling each student's "God-given potential" through evangelization. Expanding the definition of "pro-life" to include a broader commitment to all individuals, including those with disabilities, is also emphasized.
- **Cultural and Practical Shifts:** Cultivating a school culture where "everyone in the school is responsible for every child". This includes welcoming protocols, immersive experiences for leaders, and leveraging organizations like the Knights of Columbus for fundraising and advocacy.

- Modeling and Teaching Belonging: Modeling and teaching belonging through curriculum and materials and learning from students themselves. This extends to embedding inclusion in the curriculum and parish activities like altar serving.
- Accountability and Data: Using diversity statistics as a measure to reflect diversity in schools, gathering data on disability to compare with parish rates, and telling honest, human-centered stories.

Outlier Responses and Areas of Concern

- "Uncomfortable Truths": The explicit acknowledgment of "uncomfortable truths" that "Catholic schools don't serve kids with disabilities" and the "problem of tokenism" are blunt outlier statements, highlighting systemic failures and the performative nature of some inclusion efforts.
- "Destroying" School Brand: The "fear that students with disabilities will 'destroy' the school or the school's 'brand'" is a stark outlier, revealing a deep-seated apprehension about the perceived impact of inclusion on reputation.
- "Patholatry at the High School Level": The term "patholatry at the high school level" implies an excessive focus on academic rigor or a specific pathway that hinders true inclusion, particularly at the secondary level.
- "Federal Funds as 'Poison Pill'": The concern that "Federal funds → 'poison pill'" where "Schools take choice \$ but don't have resources to serve kids" highlights a specific anxiety about funding mechanisms potentially leading to unintended negative consequences.
- Teachers as Ministers: The question "Are teachers ministers or not?" is an outlier that prompts a deeper theological and vocational reflection on the role of educators in Catholic schools beyond mere instruction.
- "Just Try": The simple, yet impactful, repeated suggestion to "Just try" and "Equal opportunity to just try" stands out as a call to action against paralysis by analysis or fear of failure.
- Lack of Experience as a Barrier: The "Lack of experience with those with learning/living differences" is a specific, actionable barrier that points to the need for direct exposure and professional development.
- "One-on-one aides report to parents, not the school": This logistical detail reveals a specific operational challenge that complicates accountability and coordination for providing services.

Session Four: *Opportunities to Serve More of God's Children in an Era of School Choice*-Shawn Peterson

Shawn Peterson offered a primer on school choice and the possibilities that it offers to families with students with disabilities. Mr. Peterson offered a powerful case on the rights of the parents to use school choice to support their educational choices for their students. This lays a strong framework for how these programs can support educating students with disabilities.

Roundtable discussion question included:

How does the expansion of school choice, with varying levels of inclusion and support for students with disabilities across different schools, affect the overall integrity of inclusive education? Does it lead to a fragmented system where some students are left behind?

In an era of school choice, how should we redefine "opportunity" to ensure it encompasses not just the ability to choose a school, but also the right to access a high-quality, inclusive education that meets the diverse needs of *all* students, including those with disabilities?

This synthesis of Session Four focuses on preparing Catholic schools for increased inclusion, particularly in the context of school choice programs. It identifies major themes related to readiness, mission, sustainability, and collaboration, while also highlighting key concerns and outlier perspectives.

Proactive Preparation and Infrastructure Development: A dominant theme is the necessity for Catholic schools to proactively prepare for increased inclusion, rather than waiting for school choice funding to arrive. This involves "doing something un-Catholic and looking into the future" to anticipate needs. Key aspects include building infrastructure before money and students arrive, implementing necessary practices, and de-implementing those not beneficial for all students. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is emphasized as beneficial for all students.

Mission-Centric Approach and Catholic Identity: The conversation frequently returns to the core mission of Catholic schools. Inclusion is seen as an "opportunity to evangelize" and a "ministry to the whole community", setting Catholic schools apart from others. There's a strong emphasis on maintaining Catholicity and the ability to "truly accompany students", preventing "mission drift". This means avoiding becoming "pseudo public schools" or replicating secular education's problems. The concept of "investment in souls" underscores the spiritual dimension of inclusion.

Strategic Advocacy and Collaboration for School Choice: Parents' right to choose schools is framed as a basic right, and Catholic schools should actively advocate for it. Messaging needs to be clear that Catholic schools are not against public schools but rather provide a faith foundation and can lift kids out of poverty. Collaboration is key, with models, mentors, and exemplars. The "Catholic Talent Project" aims to "build the bench" of mission-based educators.

Sustainability and Financial Preparedness: Concerns about the sustainability of inclusion efforts, especially if funding programs fail or are withdrawn, are prominent. The discussion explores backup plans and how money is allocated. While funding is often perceived as a barrier, some note that it's not always fully utilized and other contingencies might be necessary. The importance of understanding how money flows (to child or school) is discussed, with the idea that direct school funding allows for better coordinated professional development and capacity building.

Addressing Barriers and Building Capacity: Numerous barriers to inclusion are identified, including the difficulty of educating current and new families about the differences between Catholic and public-school resources, parental demands (especially from those with a history of conflict), and the logistical restrictions imposed by following public school schedules. Practical steps include training principals to advocate and understand the process, talking to experts, and ensuring that if K-8 inclusion is done, K-12 is also pursued.

Outlier Responses and Areas of Concern

While themes emerged, several specific concerns and outlier perspectives were voiced:

- "Pseudo Public Schools" and Mission Drift: A significant concern is the potential for Catholic schools to become "pseudo public schools" and lose their ability to truly accompany students, leading to "mission drift". This fear of "losing Catholicity/opportunity to evangelize" if an influx of students overwhelms resources is a recurring anxiety.
- "Stigma of 'Choice Kids'" and Commodification: The concern about avoiding the "stigma of 'choice kids'" and the idea that choice programs "may commodify students" highlight a worry about how students entering with public funds might be perceived or treated.
- Segregation of Inclusion Efforts: A notable outlier concern is that if some schools embrace inclusion and some do not, it "can be an excuse for others not doing it," potentially leading to a fragmented system where some schools become "the 'place' other schools direct students to". This could prevent system-wide integration of inclusion.
- Parental Demands and Conflict History: The specific concern about "parental demands, particularly for parents with a history of school conflict" suggests a challenging experience some schools have faced, going beyond general parent involvement.
- Funding as a Perceived, Not Real, Barrier: The statement "Funding is claimed as a barrier, but it's not in reality → a perceived barrier → even w/ money, funding not even fully used" is a direct challenge to a common perception, suggesting that the problem might be more about readiness and utilization than sheer financial access.
- Students' Motivation for Catholic Education: The point that "Students receiving \$ aren't necessarily looking for a Catholic ed" raises a unique challenge regarding the evangelization mission, implying that some students may be enrolling purely for academic or logistical reasons, which could impact the school's ability to imbue its Catholic identity.
- Barriers to Testing: The logistical barriers related to testing for disabilities, specifically that it "can take up to 12 mos. so some parents won't bother", points to a systemic issue within the public sphere that directly impacts Catholic schools' ability to identify and serve students.

Session Five: *Serving All Students? What Federal "Proportionate Share" Data say about Special Education Services in Catholic Schools. A Pilot Analysis:*
Colin Hitt

Dr. Hitt presented a pilot analysis investigating the federal proportionate share data about Catholic schools. This pilot analysis was focused on the dioceses of Missouri and raised a number of questions about access and data collection.

Roundtable discussion question included:

How do Catholic schools interpret and implement the "proportionate share" requirements under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)? What are the challenges they face in meeting these obligations, and what best practices can be identified to improve compliance?

This synthesis focuses on how Catholic schools interpret and implement "proportionate share" requirements under IDEA, the challenges they face, and identified best practices, drawing from the provided notes from Session Five with Colin Hitt.

Challenges in Interpreting and Implementing Proportionate Share: A central theme is the significant misunderstanding and challenges Catholic schools face regarding "proportionate share" requirements under IDEA. These challenges include:

- **Misunderstanding of Funds:** Confusion between Title funds and proportionate share.
- **LEA Non-Cooperation:** Local Education Agencies (LEAs) are often unwilling to share, or share incorrectly/sloppily, sometimes claiming lack of personnel or even illegality. There is a noted "lack of LEA cooperation" and a need to "put the pressure on" public schools for more staffing and services.
- **Miscommunication and Blame:** Miscommunication arises due to the Blaine Amendment (seen as a restriction by public schools), leading to confusion about Catholic/private and state money. State Education Agencies (SEAs) are seen blaming either the public or private side.
- **Lack of Knowledge and Capacity:** Staff are often not trained or informed on IDEA. Catholic schools may also lack consistent data or a strong enough case to convince LEAs of student eligibility. There's a general "lack of capacity" and the evaluation process (Child Find) may be "broken".
- **Parental Confusion and Fear:** Parents are often unsure what to do, get discouraged, and are fearful of testing or diagnoses due to stigma.
- **Logistical and Process Hurdles:** Issues include navigating OSEP sheets and timelines to spend money on time, virtual meetings instead of in-person, after-school hours for services, and policies around religious symbols. The process for getting proportionate share defined and followed is often confusing, and "no one knows how to advocate".
- **Determining Services:** LEAs determine how to use proportionate share money, which doesn't always align with the services students actually need, and consultation is often "not true consultation" where decisions are already made.

Best Practices for Improvement and Compliance: Participants identified several best practices to improve compliance and service provision:

- **Dual Enrollment Models:** Utilizing models like Minnesota's where kids are dually enrolled to receive Sped services while getting a Catholic education (although dual enrollment is not available in every state).
- **Leveraging Existing Resources:** Using IEPs instead of service plans to avoid going through the LEA repeatedly and contracting SLP/OT via cohort-paid resources or billing insurance.
- **Proactive Engagement and Training:** Getting ahead of conflict, providing PD and written guides, and training principals and appropriate staff on IDEA. This also includes training "2 people deep" for sustainability.
- **Advocacy and Empowerment:** Feeling empowered to "stand our sacred ground" and knowing one's rights. This includes coaching parents (even writing scripts) and developing leadership roles to advocate at a higher level. State-level advocacy groups are also crucial.
- **External Partnerships and Expertise:** Utilizing outside expertise, including universities to provide training, and working with organizations like ADAC. Pilot programs, such as one in St. Louis with the Special School District, can bring services directly to Catholic school students.
- **Standardization and Clarity:** Standardizing forms, defining clear roles, and normalizing processes with universal training for principals and dioceses.

Need for Systemic Change and Collaboration: A recurring theme is the need for systems to "work together". This includes diocesan communication and support for school-level administration, and fostering relationship building with all stakeholders, including ombudsmen. The goal is to be proactive and systematic in counting, reporting, and sharing resources.

Outlier Responses and Areas of Concern

- **Impact of Federal-Level Changes:** The question "How will the dismantling of DOE @ Fed. level affect this?" is an outlier, pointing to a potential future disruption beyond current operational challenges.
- **Disparity Between Districts:** The mention of "disparity between districts" implies an uneven landscape of services and cooperation, suggesting that not all LEAs or areas are equally challenging.
- **Students Not Using Services / Removal from Classroom:** The concern that "Students do not always use services" and the question "Removal from classroom, is it worth it?" highlight a potential disconnect between available services and their actual benefit or desirability for students and families.
- **Emphasis on Strengths vs. Deficits:** The question "How can we access resources, based on testing/assessment, BUT still emphasize our students' strengths" points to a desire to move beyond a deficit-based model even when dealing with assessment-driven services, which could be an outlier in terms of philosophical approach.

Final Session: Strategic Priorities

The last portion of the Convening was dedicated to setting agreed upon strategic priorities. The participants spent the first portion of this day reviewing the ideas from the first day by completing a “gallery walk of the posted ideas. They returned to discuss the significant conceptual themes demonstrated in the documentation of the group work. After this, each of the groups were then directed to identify 1-3 three strategic priorities that were evidenced by this analysis. The groups then shared their priorities with the general group of participants. Similarities were identified across the groups and these priorities were combined into one “strategic priority.” At this point, the strategies were displayed, and participants were asked to vote. Each participant had 5 votes they could use to support their preferred strategic priority. Participants would use all 5 votes to support a single strategic priority, or they could choose to “split” their votes. The agreed upon strategic priorities are shared below.

Prioritized Strategies for Inclusive Catholic Education

The following strategies synthesize the key priorities identified by participants of the National Convening, presented in a refined order based on their collective voting:

1. Develop and Implement a Comprehensive Inclusive Education Framework & Training:

- Design a robust handbook/playbook outlining inclusive systems, procedures, and processes, consistent with a national unified message.
- Establish a sustained national initiative to deepen the effective implementation of inclusive education frameworks (such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)) across PK–12 Catholic schools, specifically defining and contextualizing a Catholic School MTSS Model.
- Support widespread adoption and fidelity through twice annual "belonging bootcamps" for schools, dioceses, and higher education partners at the local level, emphasizing UDL/MTSS professional development nationally and locally.
- The framework should feature customizable templates, showcase "model school" best practices, and foster regional unity.

2. Establish a National Network for Collaboration, Support, and Best Practice Sharing:

- Create a national network to connect, facilitate collaboration, and provide ongoing support to all stakeholders, including (arch)dioceses, parishes, schools, and universities.
- Identify and document successful inclusion programs within various dioceses to inform targeted messaging and develop a common language that clearly articulates the Church's moral obligation to provide Catholic education for all students.

- This network will offer essential tools, models, and resources, and facilitate data collection to bolster advocacy efforts.

3. Launch a Unified National Advocacy and Communication Campaign:

- Develop a compelling national call to action and a clear mission/vision statement that articulates the fundamental "why" of inclusive education within Catholic schools, using universally understood language with a clear and intentional connection to the Catholic Church.
- Implement a national marketing campaign centered on powerful messages that the Catholic school is an option for students with disabilities (although this can only be executed when there are more Catholic school options).
- Increase advocacy for inclusive practices at all levels (local, diocesan, state, and national) through strategic partnerships with existing agencies (e.g., USCCB, Catholic Conferences) to amplify awareness, influence policy, and optimize resource allocation.
- Actively seek and advocate for financial, spiritual, and practical support from bishops for the implementation of inclusive initiatives.

4. Create and Fund a National Organization to Operationalize the Vision:

- Establish and secure sustained funding for a dedicated national organization responsible for operationalizing and continuously advancing the vision for comprehensive inclusive Catholic education across the country.

5. Revise National Standards for Inclusive Education:

- Advocate for a comprehensive revision of the National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools (NSBECS) to explicitly include language regarding inclusion for students with disabilities.
- Ensure these revisions lead to updated standards, rubrics, evaluations, and language that promotes school populations aligning with natural proportions.

Conclusion and Call to Action for Inclusive Catholic Education

The strategies outlined above represent a powerful consensus from the National Convening, underscoring a collective commitment to fostering truly inclusive Catholic educational environments. By focusing on comprehensive frameworks, collaborative networks, unified advocacy, dedicated organizational support, and a revision of national standards, we can transform Catholic schools into vibrant communities where every child is welcomed, valued, and empowered to thrive. This vision is not merely aspirational; it is a fundamental expression of our Catholic identity and mission.

To move these priorities from vision to reality, immediate and concerted action is required. We call upon all stakeholders—educators, administrators, diocesan leaders, parents, and advocates—to embrace these strategies. The next crucial steps involve establishing a steering committee to operationalize the top-tier priorities, secure the necessary funding and resources, and develop detailed action plans for each strategic area.

It is imperative to collaboratively embark on this vital journey, ensuring that Catholic education truly welcomes "all God's children" and fully embodies the body of Christ.

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