

A young girl with dark, curly hair is smiling and looking to the right. She is in a classroom setting, with other students and desks visible in the background, though they are out of focus. The lighting is warm and natural. A red rectangular box is overlaid on the bottom half of the image, containing white text.

Catholic School Superintendent Playbook

A Resource for New Diocesan Superintendents

Dear Superintendent,

Congratulations on your new position!

Like many system-level leaders, you may be moving from a school environment where you are a decision-maker to a world where you are a coach, planner, connector, cheerleader, teammate, and occasionally an EMT! Or perhaps you are already in the central office, but moving into a new leadership role. Whatever professional path you have taken to the superintendency, you have accepted a role akin to the commissioner of the baseball league; you want to help ALL the teams win!

In an effort to prepare you for this new role, current superintendents and leaders of the Boston College / Catapult Learning superintendent professional learning community have put together this document which contains:

- General discussion topics
- topics by key relationships
- case studies

Many thanks to those Catholic school superintendents who contributed to this document, including Dan Roy (Fall River, MA), Patty Lansink (Sioux City, IA), Mike Deegan (New York City, NY), and Jim Rigg (Miami, FL). We hope that you will have the chance to work through some of this material with colleagues in our professional learning community or with a trusted mentor. By learning from and with those in community, we know your first year will be off to a winning start!

If we can be of any help during your transition, please feel free to reach out to us.

Sincerely,

Melodie Wytttenbach, Executive Director, Roche Center for Catholic Education, Boston College
wytttenba@bc.edu

Fr. Ron Nuzzi, Executive Director of Equitable Access and Excellence at Catapult Learning
ron.nuzzi@catapultlearning.com

Jim Power, Superintendent of Catholic Schools Office, Diocese of Providence, RI
jpower@dioceseofprovidence.org

Discussion Topics for New Superintendents

As you begin your new role, there are a number of items you will want to consider. We have provided you with this list of items both within the Catholic Schools' Office and at schools for you to consider.

At the Catholic Schools' Office (CSO)

- ___ Where you fit in the chancery/diocese and whom you report to
- ___ How you will be evaluated and what are your bosses' expectations are you
- ___ What is the clerical politics in the Chancery
- ___ How aligned are you to the vision and expectations of the Bishop
- ___ Aside from whom you report to, with whom must you consult
- ___ Is there anything you should know about why/how/when the prior Superintendent left
- ___ Is there a strategic plan
- ___ Is there a need for a strategic plan and what role might you play in its development
- ___ How are the schools performing in vital indicators (e.g. enrollment, standardized test scores, income vs. expense, etc.), both individually and as a system
- ___ Is there a policy manual for education? Are there other policy manuals (from other Chancery offices) that relate to schools (e.g. Human Resources, Child Protection, etc.)
- ___ What is the relationship between school planning and parish planning
- ___ Understanding your budget funding sources vulnerabilities, reliability of funding
- ___ Understand what the Bishop really wants
- ___ Understanding the relationships the superintendent has with HR and other administrators in the Chancery
- ___ Who is on your immediate staff (if applicable)
 - Are there clear job descriptions
- ___ What is your assessment of the functionality of your staff
- ___ What school boards are you now a member of and what expectations do those boards have of you
 - Is there a diocesan school board
- ___ Are you involved in hiring teachers and other school employees
- ___ To what degree is fundraising/development a part of your job
- ___ To what degree is legislative advocacy part of your job
- ___ Are there current or potential state programs you should support through advocacy, working with the state CAPE, the state Catholic Conference of the USCCB
- ___ Find out where the land minds are - They are there!



At the schools

- ___ Get to know and earn the trust of principals and pastors that first summer
- ___ Spend time at schools this summer or early fall (depending on the size of your diocese)
- ___ Get to know what the principals want from you and the CSO, and prioritize those needs
- ___ Understand government funding (Title funds) and helping new principals with this
- ___ Offer a new principals orientation
- ___ Offer a new teachers orientation
- ___ Plan regular/quarterly get togethers with all of the principals (consider format: elementary or high school)
- ___ Plan retreat(s) for principals
- ___ Help principals with professional development
- ___ Assess what pastors want/expect from you and the CSO
- ___ Partner with other institutions
(local Catholic college, for instance)
- ___ Develop a leadership program for future principals
- ___ Help principals find ways to make the schools' Catholic Identity a reality
- ___ Understand what role do you play in the search for principals
- ___ Understand what oversight you have over local policy manuals (Student/Parent, Teacher/Staff)
- ___ Learn what's going on at other dioceses
- ___ Create an 18-month bucket (for topics like developing more inclusive schools)
- ___ Clarify how principals should reach you for questions and problems. Be on call. Know how/when to engage other Chancery offices in problem-solving (e.g. HR, Legal, Child Protection)
- ___ Clarify how you will handle questions/concerns from parents and other school stakeholders
- ___ Understand what can you do to help young, modestly paid teachers, earn graduate degrees
- ___ Understand how schools operate local boards, and what your office supports for their board development/governance
- ___ Ask principals how they want you to respond to angry parents who contact you directly
- ___ Understand the different roles you may play with diocesan rather than parish schools and religious order schools
- ___ Clarify how to make yourself available to principals who may just see you as "just another bureaucrat"
- ___ Learn what role might you play in accreditation and consider accrediting bodies



At the schools continued:

___ Be a general problem solver with issues like: how can schools improve their level of support for students; how can we improve our IT infrastructure; how might principals meet in small group/deaneries; how school schools might improve security and how might they communicate this; how to make yourself available so that principals feel comfortable calling you when they have a problem; help principals determine when they need legal advice; helping principals with difficult parents; how to help with admissions and advancement.

*This is an example of a principals' list of priorities:

1. Promote wellness
2. Help admissions
3. Improve our Catholic Identity
4. Help with advancement
5. Help with grant writing
6. Find or offer professional development
7. Help schools with health and safety issues
8. Help schools engage with parents
9. Help schools with Title funding and ERC opportunities





Focus areas for New Superintendents sorted by the four domains of the National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Schools

MISSION AND CATHOLIC IDENTITY

- Plan a retreat for the principals
- Find out what pastors want from you and the CSO
- Help principals find ways to make the Catholic Identity a reality

ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

- Help principals with professional development
- Help teachers obtain graduate degrees and certifications

OPERATIONAL VITALITY

- Gain an understanding of government funding and help new principals with this
- Partner with other institutions (like a local Catholic college)
- Develop a leadership program for future school leaders
- Learn what is going on in other dioceses

GOVERNANCE/LEADERSHIP

- Getting to know and earn the trust of principals and pastors
- Spend time at the schools over the summer and in early fall
- Offer a New Principals Orientation- Offer a New Teachers Orientation
- Plan regular meetings with the principals (individually and with the group)
- Understand your role in the principals' search process
- Understand any oversight responsibility with policies / manuals
- Create an "18-month bucket" for long term issues
- Clarify how principals should reach you - Clarify how principals want you to handle parent issues
- Determine what role you play with school boards
- Understand how your role may change, depending on the school's being a parish or regional or religious order institution.
- Make yourself available as a resource for principals
- Understand what, if any role, you play in accreditation.
- Getting to know what the principals want from the CSO and prioritizing those needs

Topics by Key Relationships

a. The Superintendent supervises the work of the Catholic Schools Office.

Related topics are:

1. Your job description: responsibility/authority/accountability
2. The previous superintendent
 3. Policy
 4. Staffing
 5. Data
 6. Budget
7. Principal and new teacher orientations
8. Principal development
9. Strategic planning

b. The Superintendent works with and is, in some cases, accountable to the Chancery.

Related topics are:

1. Understanding Chancery departments, dynamics, and ways of working together
2. Reporting
3. When to seek consultation (legal, HR, safe environment, finance, media)

c. The Superintendent is accountable to the Bishop.

Related topics are:

1. Understanding expectations
2. Alignment to vision
3. Reporting

d. The Superintendent's office provides guidance and support to the Schools.

Related topics are:

1. Performance measurement
2. Parent concerns
3. Teacher performance issues
4. Teacher hiring
5. Building trust with Principals and Pastors
6. School visits
7. Expectations of and from CSO

e. Areas of CSO/School Collaboration

Related topics are:

1. Government funding
2. Catholic identity
3. Principal search/hiring
4. Teacher development
5. Accreditation/improvement planning
6. Strategic planning

f. The Catholic Schools Offices interacts with outside partners.

Related topics are:

1. Grants & foundations
2. Legislative advocacy
3. Higher education
4. Other diocesan ministries (Catholic Charities, hospitals, Pro Life, etc.)
5. Inter-diocesan collaboration
6. Fundraising



Resources to Explore:

National Catholic Educational Association:

NCEA- Convening all stakeholders and providing professional development, data, advocacy and resources to support faith and intellectual formation.

Catholic Higher Education Serving Catholic Schools (CHESCS):

National network of Catholic colleges and universities with professional education departments, schools, divisions and centers directly affiliated with NCEA to enhance P-12 Catholic schools for the good of society and the good of the Catholic Church. CHESCS members partner with Catholic schools supporting them with professional development, formation of leaders/teachers, and research.



Council for American Private Education (CAPE):

National network of non-public schools (Catholic and non-Catholic). Offers resources and advocacy for non-public schools. Manages the Blue Ribbon Award for private schools, on behalf of the US Department of Education.

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB):

This is the Conference of Bishops from all dioceses in the United States. It includes the Secretariat for Catholic Education dedicated to providing resources for Catholic schools and advocating for national-level programs.

Journal of Catholic Education:

Academic journal of Catholic education, managed by various Catholic universities (currently University of Notre Dame)

Marshall Memo:

A great summary of educational articles published by Kim Marshall, 50 times a year since 2003, designed to keep principals, teachers, instructional coaches, superintendents, and other PreK-12 educators well-informed on current research and best practices. Great summary for busy leaders!

Phi Delta Kappan:

Phi Delta Kappan is the professional magazine for anyone who cares about K-12 education. In print since 1915, it features articles connecting educational research, practice, and policy.

New Superintendent Case Studies

#1 THE FIRST YEAR PRINCIPAL

At a 4th of July picnic you meet someone who, after hearing about your new position, pulls you aside, so that she can speak to you in confidence. “You can’t use my name because she’ll sue me, but I think you are going to have a REAL problem at St. Peter’s. I was her principal last year at a local public school where she taught 3rd grade. I had to put her on leave in October. It was an absolute gong show. She had all kinds of problems, starting with basic classroom management. But nobody from your Search Committee bothered to call me, and I often wondered about that...”

You reach out to your predecessor as well as the chair of the Search Committee in order to gain some understanding of the search. Both seem a tad defensive. “It was late in the year, and she was clearly the most Catholic of the candidates. The salary was quite modest, and that limited the pool. I hope you’ll work with her and give her a chance.”

The first of several summer parent calls started in mid-July. “I just went in to meet with our new principal, and I found her really off putting. I didn’t get the sense that she was listening to me. She wants to make changes and she said that she wants to ‘put St. Peter’s on the map.’ I think we are already a good school. I found our conversation disheartening. I’m not alone. Several parents have had similar conversations and at least one is pulling her 3 children...”

Earlier in the summer, you had reached out to the new principal and took her to lunch, as a way of getting to know her. What stays with you from that first meeting was that you’d already finished your meal, before the principal started on her salad. She was bubbling over with energy, with lots of plans for an exciting future. The only advice you offered was, “It’s good to spend a lot of time listening and affirming your new school.” The principal nodded quickly, and then began to describe a new robotics program. “I know it will really turn admissions around!”

The teachers' calls began after Labor Day. Most of them expressed similar concern. “She comes across like a hostile or suspicious boss. She is throwing her weight around in all of the wrong ways. She is banning us from coming in over the weekends for some reason. I’ve tried to talk to her, but I don’t feel any connection. It feels like she’s not listening, and I get the sense that she’s already got a plan that she is going to execute, no matter what.”

You visit the school on a weekly basis, and you can feel a certain heaviness in the atmosphere. There are more furtive glances than smiles, and several teachers suggest meeting off campus “Just to talk.”

Questions to discuss:

- What are the issues?
- What are your options?
- Whom do you involve?

#2: THE MISSION STATEMENT

St. Luke's is a thriving K-8 school located in a bustling suburb, and their principal, an affable 40-year-old, was on your selection committee. You tell yourself that you'd have a natural connection with him, even if he hadn't come across as a major supporter of you during the process.

After Thanksgiving of your first year, the Vicar calls you into his office. "I've been reviewing a number of mission statements, and I want St. Luke's to be more explicitly Catholic. I want something along the lines of 'We are followers of Jesus' or 'We are disciples of Jesus Christ' – something along those lines in their statement. Please get this done. And I don't want this to be a major brouhaha. Just tell them 'We need this done'."

You call St. Luke's principal and share the request. The principal is not his usual self, but he says he understands and that he will pass this along to his board chair.

A month later you get a call from the Board Chair. "The principal shared your thinking about our mission statement, and we had a good discussion at yesterday's board meeting. Because we made so many investments in marketing materials a few years ago, when we had just revised the statement, we've decided not to make any more changes. Also, I think anyone who knows us understands that we are a deeply Catholic school; we've got the words "Catholic" and "gospel values" in the statement already. And besides, the students recite the mission every morning, and we don't want to make them change, either."

You thank the Board Chair and then send a note to the Vicar, summarizing your conversation. You immediately get an email from the Vicar. "See me!"

As you walk down to the Vicar's office, you find yourself thinking about that exclamation point.

Questions to discuss:

- What is the problem?
- What are your options?
- Whom should you involve?

#3: THE GRADUATION QUESTION

It was an April afternoon, when the principal of the Benedictine boys school in the diocese asked to see you. "I probably should have met with you earlier in the year, but you were new, and I wasn't quite sure about what to do. This is all so new to me, too..." The principal's voice trailed off. He gathered himself for a moment, before continuing.

"Last August Daniel, a rising senior, came in to meet with me, and he brought along his parents. In a nutshell, Daniel no longer sees himself as a male, and yet he wanted to continue to attend St. Ben's to graduate with his friends this spring. The parents were supportive -- at least at first --and they suggested that they'd already spoken to the Abbot about this.

I want you to know that I initially pushed back. I told them that St. Ben's has always been and remains a boys school; that we were a boys school by tradition and by conviction. I reminded them of our tag line, 'We Believe in Boys.'

Anyway, I followed up with the Abbot, and we agreed that Daniel should be given the right to finish his high school career with his friends; we actually thought that might be the path of least resistance.

I confess we tried to low key this. We didn't want the whole thing to explode in the press. But we did put down some clear conditions: Daniel had to observe the dress code. While he doesn't play a sport, he had to wear a coat and tie at debate and other public gatherings. I'm letting him use my washroom, and I asked -- I didn't require -- teachers to use his preferred name and pronoun.

You see I was trying to find the middle ground, the greater good. But now I'm stuck. A number of times this year "Denise" has come into my office in tears because someone referred to the student body as 'boys', and on more than one occasion a teacher has used her 'dead name.' That really sets her back when that happens. And didn't even know what a 'dead name' was.

But the reason I wanted to meet with you today is this: Daniel, I mean Denise's parents came to see me. They said, 'It's important that Denise present herself as a female before she goes to college, so she will attend graduation in a white dress.' I confess, things got a little adversarial after that. I felt betrayed. We had tried all year to accommodate the family, and now this...

As they walked out of my office they said, 'Denise will wear a dress on June 6th. And if you won't let her graduate with her class, she will be there as a guest of her friends. We've had a good number offer to invite her, so you can either make this happen or deal with the turmoil you will have created'."

The superintendent suddenly felt like an actor in a Southwest "Want to Get Away" ad.

Questions to discuss:

- What are the issues?
- What are your options?
- Whom do you involve?



Catapult Learning 



BOSTON COLLEGE
Lynch School of Education
and Human Development

ROCHE CENTER FOR
CATHOLIC EDUCATION