

PAROCHIAL SCHOOL VITALITY

Timothy Romano* & Catherine Zeisner**

Abstract Catholic schools in the United States face severe challenges to financial stability. Decreasing enrollment and increasing expenses are negatively affecting school budgets and threatening school vitality. Parishes consider closing or consolidating schools facing economic challenges. Catholic schools utilize vitality metrics to create school profiles that focus on financial viability factors such as enrollment, tuition collection, alternative revenue sources, and parish subsidy. However, evaluation of school vitality places significant emphasis on the financial threshold for a parish to support its school. This study sought to understand the relationships between Catholic parochial schools and their sponsoring parishes to contribute to the larger concept of school vitality currently in use. The study recommends two further parish vitality factors representing the interconnectivity of a parish and school, integration of organizational structures and development, and maintenance of parish identity to broadening the understanding of parochial school viability beyond financial resources.


Keywords Viability, vitality, parish identity, Catholic education, parochial school, relational trust

Introduction

Catholic school enrollment is in a steady decline. Over the past decade, 20% of the Catholic schools in the United States have closed (National Catholic Education Association (NCEA), 2016). Studies of the Catholic Archdiocesan schools in Saint Louis and Chicago offer alarming statistics for the viability of many Catholic schools across the country. James et al. (2008) discovered school viability correlated with the total average enrollment of 200 students within the Archdiocese of Saint Louis while Lundy (1999) reported viable enrollment to be greater than 175 in Chicago. Substantial revenue is required to maintain excellent academic programming and provide students with support necessary for their educational experience families investing in Catholic education expect. Typically, tuition collection contributes to 62% of income, making it the largest revenue source for

* Principal - Assumption Parish Catholic School, tromanoassumptioncatholic.org.

** Assistant Professor - Gonzaga University, Department of Educational Leadership and Administration (DELA), zeisner@gonzaga.edu. Correspondence author.

 ORCID ID 0000-0002-3196-0958.

Catholic schools (McDonald & Shultz, 2010). Heavy reliance on tuition collection ties student enrollment to financial viability.

This study sought to understand the relationship factors between a parochial school and its sponsoring parish, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of Catholic school vitality. Traditional parochial schools struggling with viability must reflect upon the school's financial sustainability and consider varying strategies to generate revenue. It is imperative to examine schools with exemplary parish relationships and demonstrate positive enrollment trends and financial viability to ensure the future health and strength of Catholic schools.

Schools operate at the behest of their sponsoring parish to fulfill the educational mission of the church. With the financial stability of Catholic schools under significant financial stress, Catholic schools and affiliated parishes must have a realistic understanding of the school's vitality. School financial viability is a substantial factor in determining a school's sustainability, and a parish's capacity to support its school is foundational to school viability. Diocesan support helps ease Catholic schools' organizational and financial strain; however, the ongoing decline of enrollment remains a significant threat to school viability.

Catholic schools need to evolve the current concepts of school viability to include an understanding of school vitality to ensure the endurance of parochial schools. Innovative solutions are possible when a school understands its challenges and crafts a shared vision with its parish. Decreasing enrollment and increasing operational costs require Catholic schools to seek alternative models to stay economically viable. Many models have proven to improve the financial viability of schools; however, transitioning into a financially viable model often leads to the loss of the parochial identity. Financial viability is essential to parochial school sustainability, but additional factors worth evaluating may be neglected by parochial school leadership.

Guiding Questions

Do strong parish and school relationships correspond with more robust school vitality?

What do parochial schools with strong vitality do to maintain parish relationships?

How does the relationship between the pastors and principals affect school vitality?

Where are the opportunities for schools and parishes to couple, and what degree of coupling is optimal for school vitality?

Review of the Literature

The numbers of students in Catholic education, and Catholics attending mass, are in sharp decline across the United States. Religious disaffiliation is the term associated with people leaving a

particular faith. Manning (2018) indicated the difficulties determining the causes of this decline within the Catholic Church stating, "it is hard to identify with precision what the cause or causes may be...large scale Catholic disaffiliation cannot be attributed primarily to discontent with Church teachings, clergy sex abuse scandals, or society-wide liberalization of traditional values" (p. 27). Practicing Catholics' beliefs on social issues correlate with American culture in general. It is difficult to pinpoint specific issues to attribute to disaffiliation. Still, Catholics' increasing acceptance of same-sex marriage leads Manning to claim, "Catholics' moral views are increasingly diverging from official Church teaching and approximating popular opinion" (Manning, 2018, p. 30). Yet, many of these practicing Catholics are not leaving the Church.

Manning (2018) pointed out the shift away from the Catholic church is not disaffiliation but rather a shift in Catholic imagination. The Catholic imagination is how Catholics currently view themselves and their place with the Church. Attributing the decline of Catholic participation with Catholic institutions to either disaffiliation or a re-imagination of Catholic identity has significant implications on Catholic school relevance in modern American culture. Re-engaging disaffiliated Catholics to the church and employing practices to encourage Catholics to rediscover the importance of church participation is a daunting task. A clear vision of the Church is required before comprehensive strategies can be employed to counter disaffiliation or encourage re-imagination. Catholic schools, as evangelical arms of the church, require this vision to fulfill their mission.

In addition to disaffiliation, disintegration has been a cause of decreasing enrollment in Catholic schools. Disintegration occurs with a demographic shift in a community. Urban Catholic schools increasingly have to deal with disintegration as Catholics move out of urban areas and into suburbs. Whether through disaffiliation or disintegration, the parochial model for Catholic schools has been slowly deteriorating. Insufficient enrollment, financial stresses, and a loss of parish connectivity contribute to increasing parochial schools closing or consolidating.

Welsh and Campbell (2011) examined the disintegration of the parochial school system in Ohio, which closed 17 of its 18 schools between 1960 and 2006. Although they attributed these closings to the changing demographics, a steady financial downturn, and a significant reduction of Catholic families within the urban city, they reported the closures of these schools to the lack of Diocesan support and not the Catholic culture or community. The authors concluded that even though the school populations were increasingly composed of non-Catholic students, their culture, and community kept them afloat for as long as they did. Additionally, the schools had lost their parish identity and the parochial support, both financial and spiritual, which accompany a strong school/parish relationship.

Transformation of Catholic Imagination

Manning (2018) reported that Catholics today are no less spiritual than they were in the past, but their current imagination is more secular. He indicated there is an opportunity to work with contemporary Catholic imaginations to rebuild an inclusive and supportive imagination of Catholic education. Frey et al.'s (2004) research on Catholic high school students' spirituality indicated Catholic high school students demonstrate a high level of spirituality and discovered a correlation between student spirituality and hope. These students maintained their spirituality and hope even though they were less engaged in the institutions of the Catholic Church.

Brennan (2011) supported the importance of community to the Catholic imagination, "Roman Catholic communities need to unify in faith toward knowing who they were, who they currently are, and where they are going as a community-of-persons" (p. 29). Frabutt et al. (2010); Murphy (2002) and Crea et al. (2015) reported Catholic education is faced with more than a crisis of Catholic culture, but also one of a grounded local Catholic community association. Murphy (2002) connected Catholic imagination to the community stating, "What is often forgotten is that community is necessary to remembering and telling the stories by which people define themselves" (p. 6). Examining how Catholics engage in community is beneficial to understanding the Catholic imagination. Catholic schools and their built-in communities are primed to assist in transforming the Catholic imagination.

Manning (2018) pointed out the challenge of transforming Catholic imagination within the minds of potential Catholic families with school-age students. Catholic imaginations shifted as "parents who experience a vestigial desire for their children to receive the sacraments but who cannot see what the added benefit a Catholic school offers when compared to an excellent public school" (p. 40). Catholic schools must distinguish themselves in the minds of potential families. Cook and Simonds (2011) presented a solution: "Catholic schools should set a new course for the future by making relationship building the distinctive purpose of all school programs" (p. 322). Reinforcing the Catholic imagination is possible through cultivating personal relationships within the school and parish community. To transform the Catholic imagination of families, Crea et al. (2015) recommended that Catholic educators foster a connection between families, the school, and the Church to immerse students in a consistent Catholic environment.

Perl and Gray (2007) examined the effects of attending Catholic school on the probability of remaining Catholic. They found 71% of responders who attended Catholic elementary school, and at least three years of Catholic high school, correlated positively with maintaining their Catholic imagination and did not disaffiliate with the church. They stated, "attending Catholic high school occupies a large portion of day-to-day life and seems likely to enmesh one in an array of close, dense, social ties-creating an experience of living in a Catholic community" (p. 278).

If rebuilding the Catholic imagination requires strengthening parish and school relationships, then the relationship between the parish and parents of Catholic school students need to be cultivated. Frabutt et al. (2010) presented the parental role in Catholic education and its importance to parish life from the pastor's perspective. Because Catholic school students often attend their parochial school from a young age to young adulthood, the Catholic parish and school become a "second home" for students and their parents. Frabutt et al. (2010) conducted a study of U.S. pastors to understand their perspective on the roles of parents in Catholic education. Their review of Church documents concluded that collaboration among parents and the Church is essential to supporting Catholic education. Additionally, parents recognize the importance of the community to student education through engagement with the parish community. Pastors expressed the need to improve engagement with the parents of Catholic school students as a dominant theme to improve parish and school community and ensure the parish and school are viewed not as two distinct entities but rather as a "unified whole" (p. 42).

Catholic School Leadership

Code of Canon Law 519 (1987) designates the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church, in which Bishops have legislative, judicial, and executive authority of a diocese, and pastors work at the behest of the bishop. Weiss (2007) described the Catholic school hierarchy with the pastor the extension of the bishop and the principal an extension of the pastor. The Catholic schools operate at the will of the Bishop and Pastors.

Convey (1999) presented the feelings Clergy had about the Catholic school system within thriving Catholic schools with a growing enrollment, especially suburban areas, and reported the highest assessment of the worth and quality of Catholic schools. Although bishops and priests hold Catholic schools in high regard, it is noteworthy to see discrepancies between Clergy on their views of Catholic schools. They presented the characteristics of Clergy that influenced perception. "It is critical to note that priests directly involved in Catholic schools are among the most supportive of them, as are many younger priests who are likely, in due time, to become pastors of parishes with schools" (p. 260). Subsequently, Convey (1999) pointed out the lowest assessment reported by Clergy in stagnating or declining enrollment areas. Additionally, they stated that priests with unfavorable views of schools are assigned to parishes without schools and indicated this might skew the data. They reported a concerning trend that "weaker support for Catholic schools, particularly in the assessment of Worth, by some pastors of parishes without schools and some priests who have not had a Catholic school background themselves" (p. 261).

Parochial schools fulfill the parish's mission; however, a frustration pastor of parishes with schools report is the decreasing enrollment (Frabutt et al., 2010). They stated the frustrations of pastors who determine parents view the parish schools as "private rather than parochial" (p. 37). Belmonte and Cranston (2009) reported this reality as well, "faced with the contemporary society,

characterized by a plurality of beliefs and experiences, it cannot presume all students, family, and teachers are fully committed to Catholic traditions" (p. 301). Although many parents are not active parish members (Lundy, 1999; Welsh & Campbell, 2011), it is vital to increase the number of parish families who attend the parish school.

Interviewing experienced pastors of parishes with schools, Frabutt et al. (2010) indicated many pastors recognized the opportunity to reframe the parochial school by "making the parish community aware of the need for and importance of [the Catholic] school to the future of our children in the parish" (p. 37). As such, they authors showed parent involvement as integral to the reframing process: "new governance models emerging in dioceses throughout the United States require deep and meaningful partnerships with parents to ensure accountability and transparency in school operations" (p. 37). Reframing the mission, vision, and philosophy is necessary to re-establish the importance of parish families having their children attend the parochial school (Frabutt et al., 2010).

The organizational design of Catholic parochial schools is essential to school vitality. Weiss (2007) reported a strong collaborative relationship between pastors and principals might help stabilize Catholic school vitality. They stated, "The shared relationship between these two key players, the parish pastor, and school principal is essential for the life and future of the Catholic education" (p. 9). However, the Churches hierarchical organizational structure is an obstacle to pastor and principal collaboration. As the bishop's representative, the pastor has the direct and legislative authority to administer the school (Weiss, 2007). Essentially, principals recognize the legislative authority of the pastor and pastors to recognize and grant the school principal the appropriate level of autonomy to administer the school. They concluded that the hierarchical organization of the church should not be applied to Catholic schools. Finally, they said pastors and principals must "examine their relationships in the context of how they view each other within the organization" (p. 15), and roles must clearly be defined.

When these roles are not clearly defined, problems arise between pastor and principal as each views the other as not staying in their appropriate lane (Belmonte & Cranston, 2009). Belmonte and Cranston (2009) stated, "there was general confusion as to the precise nature of the relationship between the lay principal and the local church, suggesting that there was little evidence of a functioning relationship among principals and priests" (pp. 304-305). They elaborate by stating, "Principals reported many priests were authoritarian" (p. 305). Although Canon Law 519 (1987) grants this authority to pastors, the lack of collaboration is detrimental to a principal's ability to fulfill the school mission (Belmonte & Cranston, 2009). Belmonte and Cranston (2009) reported the key finding to be "priests need to step away from the hierarchical views and work in collaboration [with principals]" (p. 311). Weiss (2007) concluded principals to be empowered by pastors to "exercise knowledge of leadership and administration for the effective operations of the school" (p. 20).

School Models and Governance

Goldschmidt and Walsh (2011) identified nine distinct Catholic educational models: parish schools, private schools, inter-parish schools, Diocesan schools, consortium schools, private school networks, K-12 school systems, university partnership schools, and faith-inspired charter schools. They determine successful governance models embrace "the articulation of mission, policy development and enforcement, the establishment of core priorities, and employment and evaluation of key leadership" (p. 14).

Parochial schools owned and operated by a single parish are the most prominent governance model (Goldschmidt & Walsh, 2011). The parochial school is legally incorporated with its parish and bound by civil and canonical law. The pastor has the ultimate authority to hire the principal and teachers. Principals and teachers work "at the behest of the pastor as the administrator over the educational functions of the school" (p. 15). Although the pastor grants the principal the authority to run the school, the level of control the pastor allows the principal varies between parishes (Goldschmidt & Walsh, 2011). They presented the relationship between the school and the parish as pivotal to both the school's vitality and viability.

Britt (2013) cited enrollment and finances as the most distinctive and significant challenges for many parochial schools. James et al. (2008) developed a predictive tool that evaluates total enrollment, enrollment trends, and median household income to determine Catholic school viability. They presented sustained enrollment counts of under 200 students as the threshold for parish school viability. Lundy (1999) reported a similar enrollment threshold of 190 student enrollment counts sustained over time. The enrollment challenge facing the parochial school system is real, with a negative enrollment trend in the United States (NCEA, 2020).

Tuition rates have steadily risen over time to offset the rising operational costs of Catholic schools (James et al., 2008). Goldschmidt and Welch (2013) indicated that tuition costs make up 64% of Catholic school budgets. James et al. (2018) stated that medium household income contributes significantly to school viability, with higher-income families contributing a more significant portion of tuition costs. Unfortunately, tuition is not enough to maintain parish Catholic school viability. Britt (2013) stated, "Over the last several decades, however, not much has been done outside of closing and consolidating schools" (p. 338). They indicated new governance models are not being applied sufficiently, as "the single administrator model (principal only) and consultative board approach still dominate the way Catholic schools are structured and governed today" (p. 338). This model is inadequate as it frequently relies only on tuition and parish subsidies to overcome financial deficits.

Britt (2013) refers to parish schools that reorganize with other like-minded parish schools into a single school entity rather than discontinue Catholic education altogether as a consolidated school model. Wolsonovich et al. (2018) concluded the predominant reason for adopting the regional Catholic school is "diocese have decided to reorganize their parish schools into various types of regional school systems in which the schools collaborate to increase their financial longevity and academic competitiveness" (p. 175). Furthermore, they presented academic competitiveness and financial viability as the most common reasons governing boards reorganize schools into the regional or inter-parish school model. They showed governing boards had a positive perception of school reorganization because it made them "more attractive to families" (p. 175). Seventy-eight percent of respondents claimed reorganization from a parish to a regional system was necessary for survival, and 83% of respondents believed the reorganization strengthened the school's financial viability (Wolsonovich et al., 2018).

Britt (2013) presented the top five reasons governing bodies associate the necessity for consolidation as "financial challenges, enrollment decline, centralized administrative responsibilities, building maintenance, and facility upkeep, and inconsistent finances between schools" (p. 348). They found the discrepancy between school successes against the reasons for consolidation and indicated the longer-term viability of consolidated schools to be inconsistent. They presented the financial implication consolidation had on the budgetary line items of tuition, parish subsidy, and development then reported a troubling contradiction, "Participants agree that the system model has improved finances, yet over half of the systems reported that they were not able to balance their operating budget at least once over the past three years" (p. 356).

Although enrollment trends were expected to increase after three years, only 11% of the schools realized enrollment improvement, and 37% continued to experience enrollment decline with a 51% majority experiencing stable enrollment. Enrollment data presented by Britt (2010) contradicts the perception of governing bodies that consolidation will increase enrollment (Wolsonovich et al., 2018). They indicated nearly "three-fourths of the systems reported that schools closed at the time of consolidation or since consolidation occurred," with a third of the remaining school' enrollment declining greater than 5%. In addition to enrollment concerns, Britt (2013) recognized expected financial viability gains are not always realized.

Britt (2013) reported parish subsidies fell "from 22% to 20%" of the budget after reorganization (p. 348). Although Goldschmidt and Walsh (2011) stated parish subsidies should be no more than 25% of a school's budget to maintain financially stable, consolidation results in a decreased subsidy for the school. This decrease is concerning because multiple parishes support a consolidated school (Britt, 2013). Wolsonovich et al. (2018) pointed out "it is difficult to convince wealthier parishes of the need for parity among participating schools, where wealthier parishes shared their resources

with the school system, thereby assisting in the financial support of the less wealthy parishes" (p. 181).

Consolidated schools must increase alternative revenue sources to maintain a balanced budget (Britt, 2013). The average development line item reflects 20% of the regional system budget, which is more than double the parish school's national average (Britt, 2010). Britt (2013) and Wolsonovich et al. (2018) reported school leadership, including governance boards, is highly confident in their abilities to make their development budgets. Wolsonovich et al. (2018) indicated consolidated schools demonstrate significant improvement in school development planning and implementation of strategic plans. Both Britt (2013) and Wolsonovich et al. (2018) concluded reorganizing to a regional system could be an effective and viable strategy to provide Catholic education when traditional parochial schools are no longer financially viable. Schools that choose consolidation instead of closing face an uphill battle to remain viable. Britt (2013) pointed out unsuccessful consolidated schools may still close when parochial schools fighting for survival wait too long to begin the consolidation process.

Methodology

Study Participation

Three parochial schools and their principals located in the western region of the United States participated in this study. All were accredited by the Western Catholic Education Association (WCEA) within the past five years and recommended by their Diocesan Office of Education (DOE). Importantly, an exemplary relationship between parochial school and sponsoring parish was the primary criteria for recommendation.

Data Collection Sources

The three participating schools provided their WCEA accreditation self-study report and the visiting team's report, the school principal participated in an interview, and further school data collected from the diocese in which the schools were located. The schools belong to the WCEA therefore, are required to produce a self-study report every six years, implement an action plan from the previous self-study, and present data on performance indicators. Schools identify strengths and develop an action plan addressing the critical goals identified through the evaluative process.

1. Accreditation Documents

The WCEA self-study is a comprehensive study of a school's status, the progress made towards critical goals identified during the previous accreditation cycle, and an action plan for goal attainment for newly identified goals for the next accreditation cycle. Subsections of the

accreditation self-study pertain to *School Profile, Catholic Identity, School Mission, Philosophy, and Purpose* providing information regarding the parish and school relationship with the subsection for *Resource Management and Development* presenting school financial viability.

An independent team of Catholic teachers and administrators from the local diocese or Archdiocese and WCEA Accreditation Chair provided by the WCEA from outside the diocese writes the report. This team spends three days observing the school operations, conducting interviews with stakeholders, and reviewing the school's self-study report. Data from the accreditation team report verifies the school's self-study data and a rubric provides designations to justify the observations on each factor. The four designations are *Highly Effective, Effective, Somewhat Effective, or Not Effective* with the *Highly Effective* and *Effective* designations enabling schools to receive full accreditation status and maintain the six-year cycle.

2. Principal Interviews

Semi-structured interviews conducted with the three school principals consisted of eleven questions designed to flesh out parish and school relationships, administrative planning and promotion, student service, relationships between the parish and school stakeholders, parish perspective on school mission fulfillment, willingness of the parish to maintain support, and parish contribution to school financial viability.

Data Analysis

The principal interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. Data analysis followed thematic analysis, which identified and reported patterns. Coding was done after reading the interview transcripts and accreditation documents multiple times and grouped patterns into categories according to the principles presented in *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Saldana, 2013). Finally, the patterns and categories were organized into vitality themes, vitality factors, and the types of parish/school relationships expressed by the data.

Ethics

Ethics approval was granted by the dioceses of the schools involved and an Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the Quality Improvement/ Quality Assurance (QI/QA) application and instruments. Informed consent was obtained from participants; interviews conducted privately, obtained documents strictly secured, and the letter A, B, or C assigned to the schools and principal to ensure anonymity.

Findings

Accreditation documents from the three schools provided data on twelve accreditation factors (WCEA, 2012). Of these factors, five provided information relevant to this study. The five accreditation factors (AF) used were:

AF #3: The school is Catholic, approved by the Local Ordinary (Cannon 803), providing opportunities for community worship and participation in the Sacraments, and promoting evangelization and service to the community. A school's ability to reflect upon and incorporate its Catholic identity into its daily life.

AF #4: The school's purpose is defined through the school's mission statement, philosophy, measurable Schoolwide Learning Expectations, Arch/diocesan curriculum standards (local curriculum standards where Arch/Diocesan standards don't exist), and other governing authority expectations. A school's mission and philosophy and the degree to which the school communicates to all stakeholders.

AF #5: The organizational structures of the school focus on high achievement of all students and communicate student progress to all stakeholders. The effectiveness of a school's organizational structure.

AF #9: Within the school's community of faith, students have opportunities to participate in support services and activities to assist them in accessing the curricular and co-curricular programs to achieve the Schoolwide Learning Expectations, Arch/diocesan curriculum standards (local curricular standards where Arch/Diocesan standards don't exist), and other governing authority expectations. How a school's support programs and service-learning opportunities are utilized for student achievement.

AF #10: The Pastor, Principal, and school board develop, implement, and monitor resources and plans to ensure and support high achievement of all students of the Schoolwide Learning Expectations, Arch/diocesan curriculum standards (local curricular standards where Arch/Diocesan standards don't exist), and other governing authority expectations. A school's ability to manage current resources, plan for long-term financial viability, and the degree to which financial resources are reported to all stakeholders.

Accreditation

The accreditation documentation showed School A and School C have a rich and robust history with their sponsoring parishes. Importantly, data reflects perspectives from well-established and recently founded schools with enrollment data proving relevant as a significant factor in determining school viability as between 175-200 students. School A and B have enrollments that exceed this minimum, while School C falls well below this viability indicator.

School A is considered a highly effective Catholic school with long-standing parish relationships and financial viability. An enthusiastic parish recently founded School B and it boasted the largest enrollment of all three schools and is well funded; however, establishing the traditions and relationships with the parish takes time to develop. School C has struggled with enrollment leaving its financial viability vulnerable. Although it is financially vulnerable, it demonstrates an excellent relationship with the parish. School C has vastly improved its financial viability since its last accreditation cycle under new school leadership.

Relationships

Multiple shareholder relationships were identified with the most frequently referenced categories as organizational alignment (71), committee (42), parish life (39), and service (28). Further subcategories were identified and those relationships reflect the intentional integration of the parish and parochial school organizations through either institutional structure or shareholder interactions. Predominate sub-categories were parish council (29), informal interactions (22), mission and philosophy (21), fundraising (23), mass (17), financial council (16), and school board (11). Importantly, documents and organizational alignment are present within governance models, strategic planning, and policies. These categories represent integration at the organizational level. Ministry, parish life, and service include personal connections between the parish and school stakeholders. These categories demonstrate opportunities for parish and parochial school stakeholders to collaborate or communicate.

Guiding Question #1: Do strong parish and school relationships correspond with more robust school vitality?

Mission and Philosophy. Two of the three schools have mission statements that mention the school as a parish ministry. Only School A's mission statement does not cite its connection to the parish. School C's mission statement was revised in 2009 and the self-study presents School C as, "a ministry of Parish C and a Catholic community committed to creating a learning environment that encourages students to be faithful and active Catholics who strive to know and serve God by knowing and serving others." The visiting team observed, "The mission and philosophy statements effectively reflect the Catholic identity of the school and the purpose of the school." The school operates as a mission of the parish. The mission and philosophy of School B affirm a connection to the parish. The mission statement defines "Our community" as "School, Families, and Parish." The parish formulated the mission statement in 2015, two years before the school's opening, and folded the school into the parish from its first official documents.

Governance Model. Parochial school governance models traditionally maintain the hierarchical structure with the pastor as the head of the school and the principal charged with maintaining the school's daily operations. All three schools follow this model. School bi-laws, policies, and ordinances reflect this relationship between school and parish. Parish A integrates School A into its organizational structure. The principal is a parish staff member and provides monthly reports to the parish council. The school's Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) chair, a school parent, is on the parish council. Additionally, a schoolteacher attends parish council meetings with the principal to report on school operations. Integrating multiple shareholder representatives on the parish council encourages collaboration and increases vitality. The school bookkeeper works closely with the parish finance council and the school's principal and finance officer reports quarterly to the parish finance council. Pastor A is an active school board member, and the school board includes a parish member. As noted, School A's mission statement excludes reference to the parish; however,

the level of the parish and school integration within executive councils and boards is exceptional and highly creative.

Like School A, School B maintains many organizational connections among its governance structures. Principal B is a parish staff member and attends all parish staff meetings. Principal B also attends parish council meetings. Parish finance councils and parish councils maintain oversight of school finances and budget. The school board is configured with multiple parishioners with specific finance, business, law, and development working with the school principal, pastor, and parent representation.

School C demonstrates similar integration with parish councils. The principal is a member of the parish council, and the pastor is an active member of the school board. Each school and parish employed a separate bookkeeper who the newly created parish office manager supervises. Although School C had to overcome inept business practice, it serves as an exceptional example of the parish and school relationship enabling the school to work through significant challenges to financial viability. School C is still in operation because of this vitality and the parish's belief that the school is worth supporting.

Financial Support. Financial support of Parochial schools by their parishes is often necessary for school financial viability. Financial support also affects the vitality of a parish and school community. Ownership and community buy-in are facilitated when a parish organization supports its school financially. School vitality reflects a parish's willingness to support its school. This section reviews parish financial support regarding subsidy, capital campaigns, and parishioner donations. School A has significant revenue sources beyond tuition, and therefore financial viability is not a concern. A strong relationship between School A and its parish is expressed through the financial support offered by the parish organization and individual parishioners. The parish maintains a modest subsidy relative to the school budget. Although the subsidy is modest, it is appropriate to the school's needs.

Parishioners of Parish A support their school well. School A is financially viable because of planned giving, trusts, and endowments established through its parishioners. Parishioners have participated in planned giving for the development of trusts and endowments. The trusts and endowments are significant to the school's viability, but their establishment speaks to the school's positive relationship with its parishioners. Parishioners are enthusiastic participants in school capital campaigns and fundraisers. Principal A adjusted the multiple fundraisers School A conducted. He eliminated all the "cookie and gift wrap sales" to focus on one significant annual school event that generated \$150,000 of additional revenue for the school. Parishioners were also instrumental in a recent capital campaign for school remodeling. Finally, the Knights of Columbus, a men's group dedicated to service, provides scholarships for School A students.

School B's financial viability is not in question as it is a part of a wealthy and rapidly growing parish. Finances are not a concern for School B, but the parish maintains its subsidy. The parish committed to increasing the parish subsidy from 3.5% of the school's budget in 2017 to 5% in 2019. School B is financially sound and does not require the increase to maintain viability; however, like School A, School B increased its subsidy for two reasons. The first brings the percentage in line with NCEA subsidy recommendations, and the second aligns the subsidy to the amount of tuition assistance offered by the school to parish families. Additionally, School B receives substantial donations from parishioners every year through an Annual Appeal, generating approximately \$200,000 for the school.

In 2016, Parish B raised 4.6 million dollars over six months to build School B. The parish took out a construction loan to acquire the funding necessary to complete the school. Parish B assumed the entire loan and payments were never applied to the school budget. Principal B reflected upon the community's excitement for this project, "[the parish] funded the school with relatively small donations. Because it was not a couple of big donors, the number of parishioners, and the amounts they donated built the school. I think it speaks to the collective mentality of the mission, and we all feel pretty proud about that." The parish sparked the creation of the school, and the school is financially viable because of the parish's vitality.

School C is not considered wealthy, and its financial viability has been questioned for multiple years. Nonetheless, the vitality of the school and parish relationship is essential to the ongoing operations of the school. School C receives a parish subsidy and substantial financial help from parishioners. Principal C indicated that the parish subsidy they receive is "substantial" and that the parish takes up a second collection every month for the school. The second collection generates an additional \$2,000 a month. Parish C is not located in an affluent part of the diocese, and this monthly donation is appreciated. Parishioners are active with school fundraisers, have provided the school with an endowment, and contribute additional contributions at the end of the year for tax purposes.

When an additional financial need is recognized, Principal C stated the parish "generally answers the call" and the pastor is willing to help cover expenses. Principal C has an excellent relationship with the pastor and can have informal conversations about the financial trouble the school has faced. School C's financial viability has vastly improved since the hire of the current principal. The school's current deficit is 10% of what it was when he began. Principal C attributes the improvement to parish faith in leadership. The vitality of the parish and school relationship was much stronger than their financial viability. A sense of togetherness with the parish contributes to the impressive vitality of School C.

Strategic Planning. Collaborative strategic planning is evident in each of the schools. Regardless of financial viability, each school and its parish work closely together to ensure the future goals are in alignment. The intentionality of parish and school organizations aligning with each other is significant for school vitality. School A demonstrates exceptional integration with the parish regarding long-term and strategic planning. Survey data is collected from parishioners, PTO, school board, and parish council every four years to ensure organizational alignment. There is frequent overlap between the governing bodies of school and parish councils and boards as pastors and parishioners are included in the makeup of School A's school board.

Parish A manages the finances of School A and operates capital campaigns for school facilities. Parish A has established a significant endowment for the school that provides about \$160,000 a year for tuition assistance and to supplement the operational budget. Additionally, Principal A indicated that the parish maintains a subsidy of \$30,000 a year for school operations. Although the school is in exceptional financial shape, the subsidy is maintained to ensure parish engagement with the school.

School B is firmly established within the organizational structure of its parish. Accreditation documents reflect the dedication and commitment Parish B has to its school. A significant amount of planning went into the school opening. Because School B did not exist, parish administration and various parish councils and committees collaborated to create the school. All parish and future school stakeholders were surveyed to ensure the needs of parents, parishioners, and parish administrations were met. Plans for funding, building, and school educational philosophy and models were established between 2014 and the school's eventual opening. School B opened fully funded with significant financial resources and a parish community of young families eager to enroll. The strategic planning of Parish B ensured the viability of School B upon its establishment. Since 2017, the school and parish have engaged stakeholders through surveys and joint committees to ensure continuous improvement of the school.

School C has a rich history; however, it has had significant financial challenges recently. School C's accreditation documents tell how the parish and school reflected upon its past and committed to a shared vision for their collective future. The school was simultaneously undergoing the school accreditation process and a diocesan initiative for parish and school strategic planning. The alignment of these three processes proved a major undertaking; however, the effort proved successful in helping the parish and school understand its history and define its future vision of a parish with a school. The strategic planning process engaged all stakeholders, helped uncover the parish's strengths, and future goals. Community and education were two of the five strengths identified by the strategic planning process. Both indicated the school to be a strength of the parish.

Principal C expressed the importance of the organizational structure to the school's viability and the parish risked its financial viability to protect the school's financial viability. The strategic planning process allowed parish and school to create plans to overcome their financial challenges. Without this shared vision, School C may already have been closed. The strategic planning process illuminates the substantial vitality of this community.

Guiding Question #2: What do parochial schools with strong vitality do to maintain parish relationships?

Parish Identity. Parochial schools with a strong relationship with their sponsoring parishes have a well-established parish identity. Data expressed the importance of parish identity to school vitality. School A's Self-Study claimed, "A strong working partnership between parish, school, and parents." School A's sense of parish identity is shared by the parish as well, "Parish members feel a strong sense of active membership in the growth of the school." The terms partnership and membership reflect the strong identity these two organizations share and indicate the school and parish's value for each other. Consistent personal engagement establishes parish identity. The pastor of Parish A is committed to building and maintaining parish identity. Pastor A hired a contractor who specializes in invigorating the parish community. Principal A elaborated "and so there have been a lot of ideas on how to get the school and parish working closer or get our parents involved." The utilization of the specialist reignited parish identity and improved vitality.

A feasibility study identified the need for Parish B to build a school. The parish's interest in building a school was described by Principal B as "through the roof." School B has significant parish support and strives to establish its parish identity. A goal identified by School B's accreditation process is "to build parish relationships, gather feedback, and earn trust to create a true community." School B recognized a lack of history with the parish that most parochial schools take for granted. An authentic community is critical for the school's future success. Although School B has a brief history within the parish, Principal B repeatedly discussed the excellent parish engagement. They acknowledged the pride the parish has for their new school and how they are striving to "live up to the pride they have." Principal B works to "make sure all parishioners know that we are their school. We belong to them." School B has an enthusiastic parish and now looks to maintain vitality through authentic relationship building. This process has begun as Principal B, and many staff members of School B are active parishioners and frequently participate in parish functions.

Accreditation documents for School C reflect an extensive history. The school recognized parishioners' "hard work and dedication" over the years and credits this commitment to the school's vitality. The ties between the parish and school run deep through multiple generations. The principal cited many students are second and even third generation. School C is grounded firmly in the parish's identity. Principal C believes that "they are more loyal than some of our families;

families tend to come and go.” A parishioner’s survey reflection conveys this sentiment concisely, “the school feels like family.” The school is a part of the parish identity as reflections such as these permeate their data.

Communication. A school that experiences excellent vitality has open lines of communication. On the report of findings, all three schools were recognized as highly effective communicators to the parish. School B employs a communications director who ensures messaging is consistent, clear, and received by all stakeholders in the school and parish. School A and C demonstrate excellent communication with the parish as well. When a communication gap presented itself, Principal A acknowledged it is usually their fault. Little evidence was found to suggest this happens often. Multiple stakeholders are involved in communication and safeguard against significant communication lapses.

Schools A, B, and C each employ similar mediums for communicating and promoting the events each are hosting. Weekly parish bulletins promote school events, share school successes, and elicit help with service projects. Likewise, parish information is distributed with weekly school newsletters. All three schools submit articles to a monthly diocesan newsletter. The parishioners of Parish A are encouraged to subscribe to the school’s weekly newsletter and Parish A creates a quarterly newsletter explicitly designed to inform the parish of the state of the school. Schools B and C provide the parish with an annual report. Similarly, both schools’ published documents inform parishioners of the schools’ financial viability and vitality. Student academic success, student service, and school functions are reported upon and promote the school’s vitality.

Service. Each of the three schools conducts service for the parish and participates in joint service opportunities. Each of the three parishes has examples of parishioners working in the school setting serving students and teachers. The accreditation self-study of School A emphasized the importance of school service to the parish community. It stated, “The school is an active member of the faith community through service to the parish.” Students perform multiple age-appropriate services for the parish, such as student letters to sick and homebound parishioners, grounds clean up, and clothing and food drive to maintain the parish’s community outreach programs. School staff is expected to facilitate service to the parish, and they do so willingly. School B offers a Student Leadership Group. Participating students serve at parish functions, including luncheons and dinners for various parish groups. Teachers host a student service fair, and multiple parish service options are included.

School C’s purpose is defined as to be “a service to the parish” by its principal. To fulfill this purpose, classes write letters to shut in, collect food for the parish poverty fund, help the parish groundskeeper with yard clean up, and sponsor parish families during Christmas to provide dinner and presents for families in need of extra help. Junior high students serve at parish luncheons,

dinners, and staff parish bulletins. Required family service hours are typical within the Catholic school system. Schools A and B connect school parents to the parish through this requirement. School B allows for service hours worked in the parish to contribute towards the school service hours with School A requiring at least five of their twenty service hours to the parish school.

At all three schools, the relationship of service is reciprocal. Parishioners participate in multiple service opportunities within the school. School B has parishioners volunteering in classrooms and the lunchroom. School C has retired parishioners tutoring students during the school day. The Knights of Columbus is a national men's service organization with chapters in Schools A and C that conduct service to the school. The Knights at School C work on the school facility when items break or need replacing. School A's Knights also work on various school projects and host an annual free throw shoot contest for school students. The reciprocal service at parochial schools builds community. Service is integral to school vitality.

Ministry. The church is at the heart of the parish organization. Students actively participating in church ministry contributes to school vitality. Participation in parish youth groups, Mass, sacraments, and other prayer opportunities and faith formation connects students to the parish. School A, B, and C students participate in parish ministry. The ministry most commonly referenced is Mass participation. Referencing student ministry, Principal C affirmed, "[parishioners] want to see the school at mass." Students act as lectures, greeters, altar servers, gift bearers, Eucharistic ministers, and sing in the choir for weekly school masses as well as periodic Sunday masses. Semi-structured interview data suggested that parishioners highly attend weekly school masses, and parishioners take great pleasure and pride in participating in student-led mass. Principal B mentioned that many school students participate in the monthly children's mass with parishioners invited to each school's unique prayer devotionals.

Faith formation opportunities for parish and school stakeholders are another indicator of vitality. Schools A and B have developed spiritual committees. These committees compose of parishioners and school staff planning and hosting spiritual development and faith formation opportunities for the parish, including book studies, bible study, retreats, and prayer opportunities for parishioners, school parents, and staff. They also prepare retreats for children of the parish and school students.

Guiding Question #3: How does the relationship between the pastors and principals affect school vitality?

Schools A, B, and C operate under the parochial school governance model, with the pastor maintaining absolute decision-making power. School C's report of findings stated, "The principal and pastor are committed to strong parish connections, and see the school as a ministry of the parish." School C effectively demonstrates collaborative relationships between pastors and principals with clearly defined roles (Weiss, 2007). Principals offered additional insight into their

relationship with pastors. Principal A attributed the strong working relationship with the pastor as pivotal to school improvement and parish and school vitality, “I think it’s just the attitude starting with the pastor there that we are all one. We’re part of the church.” He frequently refers to him as a “really great guy” in semi-structured interview data. Principal C discusses an even more personal relationship with the pastor, “I was a first-time principal, and he was a first-time pastor of a parish with a school. And so that’s been helpful for us too because we lean on each other and are very forgiving of each other.” This relationship evolved into a friendship with shared interests, “he and I get along very well. We talk about books. We talk about movies. It is a really good relationship.” Principal B expressed little personal relationship with the pastor other than an effective working relationship.

Guiding Question #4: Where are the opportunities for schools and parishes to couple, and to what degree of coupling is optimal for school vitality?

Tightly Coupled Relationship (TCR). Accreditation documents presented relationships where pastors and principals engage with stakeholders to shape a shared vision for the school's current operations and future vitality. School A indicated the pastor and principal's role to “encourage and support a collaborative approach...to better benefit all programs of the parish” Principal A spoke to the evolution of this process and attributed the current school vitality to the pastor's relationship with the parish staff. Before the current pastor's arrival, the parish office administrator was “iron-fisted” which promoted an environment where parish ministries were overly territorial and unwilling to work with the school. He continued that the parish staff was “set in their ways” and were “not thinking of the big picture”. Principal A attributed the pastor to the collaborative vision of the parish.

Principal A commented on his impact on parish culture, “when I got here [there was not] an appreciation for the school. I had to start convincing [parishioners and parish staff] the school is important to the future of the parish.” He claimed, “Parishioners now have a vision in their head that the school is a huge part [of the parish].” Much of School B's vitality is credited to the parish creating the school's vision. The report of finding commended the parish's process of creating a school committee, hiring a principal, and working together to make many decisions and completed a multitude of tasks to establish a school. To do so, this committee conducted a series of exercises to “narrow down the values the community identified” for the school through initial surveys. Data from School C also illuminated how school vitality improved through the collaboration of parish governing bodies to create and adopt a shared vision of the school's importance to the parish. Parish C and School C conducted substantial strategic planning with considerable overlap between pastor and principal and parish council and school board.

School boards meet monthly and influence each school's operations, policy, and organizational goals. Because the three schools employ a traditional parochial school governance model, school

boards are advisory rather than decision-making boards. Pastors have final decision-making authority, but principals report a more collaborative relationship with the pastor. The principal and school board chair are responsible for planning and hosting school board meetings. Pastors are participating members with the remaining members of school boards, including school parents and parishioners. While School A and C include a single parishioner on their boards, School B's board comprises half school parents and half parishioners.

Principal C recognized the benefit of having influential and supportive parishioners on the school board as "people really listen to them." School A's self-study revealed the principal, pastor, and board chair "meet monthly to collaborate on the direction of the school." The collaboration of parishioners, parents, pastors, and principals builds awareness and trust necessary to maintain vitality. Each school's accreditation documents acknowledged the value of their school board and value the perspective of parents and parishioners. Parish councils operate similarly to school boards for the parish. They are composed of parishioners, pastors, principals, and school parents. Principals for the three schools are valuable members of parish councils who report on school operations and work in partnership with the council to develop and implement organizational goals. School B includes relevant staff members when reporting on school functions as well. School A's pastor intentionally includes school parents within the parish council. He appoints the PTO chair to this council. Principal A discussed the positive impact the PTO chairs have on parish operations, "[the chairs] have their traditions and events they have done for years...they know how to get things done, and so the church can learn from them too." The PTO's unique inclusion highlights the integration of the parish and school and the benefits of using shareholder talents.

Financial oversight of the school is another responsibility of the parish council and its sub-committee, the parish finance council. All three parishes require approval of school budgets and capital projects. Principals report monthly to the parish council on the financial situation. The Principal, school bookkeeper, and the school board's finance officer present a detailed financial report to the parish finance council monthly at Schools A and B. The Principal then presents an abridged financial report monthly to the parish council. Schools A and B demonstrate appropriate oversight of school financial viability.

Principal C illuminated the potential problem of consolidated financial oversight between parish and school. The parish employed a single bookkeeper who kept the finances for the parish and school. Although using a single person for this job was cost-effective, the limited oversight of a single person monitoring the financials proved a mistake. The accounting practices employed by the bookkeeper were not sound, with no separation of the parish and school funds. Principal C described the situation, "the school accounts, the parish accounts, it was all one huge lump of money. So, it was very hard to get financials. In addition, the bookkeeper was not as qualified as they should have been. It was a huge mess...the bookkeeper had too much power." The challenges

posed for the school were significant, “and so at the end of the month, payroll would come around, we would find out if whether [the school] would have enough to cover payroll or not.” If not, the principal would go to the pastor for help. The bookkeeper was frequently at odds with the Principal; however, the principal's relationship with the pastor enabled school staff to be paid.

Diocesan intervention forced changes to the bookkeeping structure. School C and Parish C's bank accounts are now separate, and each uses its own bookkeeper. The parish and school utilize a part-time accountant to review financial statements monthly. Principal C, bookkeeper, and the finance officer of the school council meet monthly to review finances. They then report to the parish council monthly. The TCRs monitoring financial viability is now appropriate and has resulted in significant deficit reduction for the school. TCRs such as the parish councils and school boards ensure effective school operations.

Loosely Coupled Relationships (LCR). Accreditation documents for School A drew attention to the pastor's role in providing an environment conducive to relationship building by “strongly supporting the ongoing education and participation...in the faith community.” The pastor for School A frequently interacts with the school community. The principal identified the pastor as instrumental in shifting a “territorial” mentality present within the parish to one that is collaborative, “the pastor realized they needed a softening of people over there.” The self-study affirmed the pastor's approach to team building, “the pastor makes great effort to know the staff as individuals, to assemble a unified parish team, and to set high standards for the way our Catholic faith is witnessed in the community.” Breaking down the wall between the parish and the school was necessary to realize vitality to its fullest.

Pastor A demonstrated to the community the importance of strengthening LCRs through his actions. Principal A elaborated on the pastor being present at school drop-off times before school to visit with families and his frequent visits to classrooms to visit with students. The pastor required the associate pastor and youth director to spend lunch with the students weekly. The youth director takes great strides “making it cool to be Catholic” (Simonds et al.). Besides visiting with students at lunch, the youth director for Parish A plans fun social activities for junior high students, prepares engaging school retreats with the spirituality committee, and assists students with parish service opportunities. Principal B also discussed a robust youth group participation and its importance to school vitality. The youth group director for Parish B “hosts grade-level retreats, and we collaborate very strongly with the parish so that [school] participates.”

The LCR between parish and school staff contributes to school vitality. All three schools report a positive relationship between the parish and the school staff. School C writes in their accreditation self-study that, “staff works in partnership with the parish.” Principal B explains positive relationships are maintained through “various social events with each other” and “so many of my

staff are parishioners...they attend many of the parish events.” Staff members at School B socialize with parish staff and attend parish staff meetings regularly.

Spirituality committees, utilized by Schools A and B, offer the community parish and faith formation opportunities. These committees comprise school and parish staff. This integration provides effective growth opportunities for all stakeholders and provides opportunities for parishioners, school staff, and school parents to build relationships. School A has a highly engaged staff within the parish community. They attend parish staff meetings and interact through faith formation opportunities. Parish and school staff are provided social opportunities to gather outside the work environment. Principal A discusses the importance of managing the parish expectations of the school staff. They ensure staff does not feel compelled to attend parish functions because they work long hours. Principal A balances the loosely coupled relationship of school staff and parishioners by providing engaging social opportunities for staff while protecting their personal time.

Student interactions with parish stakeholders are critical to school vitality. School C’s stressed, “Parishioners express delight and appreciation in seeing the school community as a part of the Parish.” They shared, “We try to involve the students in the parish life as much as we can.” Seeing students participate in mass is extremely important to parishioners at all three schools. Principal B emphasized the importance of mass participation, “just last week, some parishioners came up to me [after mass], I mean this happens all the time, they say, “we are just so happy for the school...there is a lot of pride.” The schools ensure parishioners are invited and celebrate weekly school mass and periodical Sunday masses. Students act as lecturers, welcome parishioners as greeters, participate as gift bearers and Eucharistic ministers, and sing in the choir to strengthen the community.

Service opportunities for students and parishioners contribute to school vitality. Students engage directly with parishioners often while performing service. Principal A stated, “Students learn that they are a part of a larger community” when participating in joint projects with the parish. School A’s report of findings commended, “students for serving the parish and their desire to expand opportunities to serve their local parish.” School C listed many service experiences for students by assisting in Parish clothing drives, food drives, working with the Knights of Columbus, helping the Parish office staff, and cleaning the parish grounds. Parishioners tutor students during the school day, support teachers in the classroom, volunteer in the lunchroom, and help maintain school grounds.

Principals utilize LCRs with parishioners to build goodwill, monitor parish sentiment, and bolster future support. Principal C elaborated on the importance of the principal and parishioner relationship. By fostering these relationships, parishioners “become his ears” and have successfully

enabled them to reshape the parish's attitude toward the school. Principal C discussed a few influential parishioners who proved to be instrumental to the increasingly positive attitude parishioners felt to the school. They called them the Coffee Crew because they have a social hour after daily morning mass where they socialize over morning coffee. The principal joined the Coffee Crew on occasion. Principal C began building a relationship with this group of parishioners and learned they were wary of the school's sustainability as one indicated, "You don't throw money at a dead horse." After many months of relationship building, the Coffee Crew is some of the most significant school supporters. When Principal C is beginning a new initiative, they will join them for coffee to "plant the seed" and let them go and spread the news to other parishioners.

Discussion

Decreasing enrollment and the subsequent loss of revenue threaten Catholic schools' financial viability (Britt, 2013; Manning, 2018; Welsh & Campbell, 2011). Parishes with parochial schools face difficult decisions when their school struggles with financial viability. When a school becomes no longer financially viable, parishes often must decide to increase financial support to keep the school, consolidate the school with another parochial school, or close the school entirely. Parochial schools operate as a mission of a parish. The financial sustainability of Catholic schools is a challenge upon which parishes must reflect. Because parishes determine the operational status of parochial schools, an overlooked aspect of parochial school viability is the parish's willingness to maintain the support for its school. School vitality is the life of a parochial school and its ability to overcome challenges.

Understanding the relationship factors between a parish and its school provides a more thorough understanding of vitality. Innovative solutions are possible when challenges are thoroughly understood. A parochial school and its parish must create and maintain an authentic shared vision. Communities with solid cultures for learning establish a shared vision (Salina et al., 2015). A culture of learning requires transparency and open communication of vulnerability. Strong relationships between the parish and school establish relational trust. Building relational trust is essential to parochial school vitality. Parishes and schools need to utilize tools and protocols designed for honest data analysis. Through authentic relationship building with the parish, parochial school communities along with open communication, trust, solid working relationships, and rich discussions promote a shared vision of the school's future, improving parochial school vitality.

Catholic Imagination and Parish Identity

Data indicates that parochial schools with strong vitality have well-established parish identities. Each of the schools reviewed for this study demonstrated actions that secure themselves within the

parish's imagination. They have a history, clearly defined and interwoven governance expectations, and communicate school operations and activities. When a parochial school's financial viability is threatened, parishes must make difficult decisions about a school's future. Catholic school vitality and a school's place within the Catholic imagination of its parish are closely related. Catholic schools struggling with vitality may receive additional support from a parish that values its school. Parishes that view their school as an essential attribute to the parish identity are motivated to help schools through difficult times.

Relationships. TCRs between parish and school provide the foundation and mandate to ensure the school remains a part of the parish identity. Decision-makers at the top of the organizational hierarchy ensure that all other stakeholders' working and social relationships are maintained. Schools with solid parish relationship vitality have leadership that cultivates community. Data indicated strong community relationships begin with the pastor and principal and how they network with parish and school stakeholders. Pastors and principals create environments where LCRs between school and parish stakeholders are expected. Relationship expectations are present in organizational structure and lived by leadership. Developing LCRs requires intentional planning because they have fewer opportunities with greater variables. Parishioners and students do not interact regularly, and schools with strong vitality organize opportunities for these stakeholders to engage with each other. Stakeholder interactions maintain a shared vision throughout the organization. Parishioners influence the future of the school and schools with excellent vitality strive to maintain parish pride through LCRs that improve school vitality.

Governance Models. Research indicates that adopting alternative governance models may improve Catholic school's financial viability. Parishes consolidate schools to stabilize enrollment and improve financial viability. Often consolidated schools do not maintain a balanced budget for multiple years following the organizational change. Many of these schools close within three years of consolidation. Britt (2013) points out the loss of identity as a significant challenge consolidated schools must overcome. Consolidation may fail when a school's previous issues are not addressed. Schools participating in this study take intentional steps to maintain parish identity. School C demonstrated exceptional school vitality while financially struggling. Instead of consolidation, it leaned on its parish relationships to maintain viability. Parochial schools with strong parish relationship vitality can overcome substantial financial challenges. The parochial school's vitality is grounded in community, and the school's powerful relationship with its parish supports the school during difficult times (Crea et al., 2015; Cook & Simonds, 2011). Parish identity strengthens through carefully cultivated relationships that endear the two communities together solidify school vitality.

Contribution to the Field

This study contributes to the field of Catholic education by broadening the understanding of parochial school viability beyond financial resources to include vitality factors representing the interconnectivity of a parish and school. Using literature, study data, and findings, two vitality factors were created to highlight how to integrate organizational structures and develop a parish identity.

Recommending Two Parish Vitality Factors

School boards and parish councils look to financial markers when determining if parochial schools with financial struggles should be consolidated or closed. We recommend using the following vitality factors and their themes in collaboration with viability factors to provide opportunities for deeper reflection by school stakeholders and offer exemplary practices of schools considered to have strong parish relationships to assist schools with strengthening vitality through building parish relationships.

Reflecting upon prominent relationship factors such as organizational structure and parish identity allows parish communities with schools to understand the values of a reciprocal relationship. Parochial schools that intentionally evaluate their relationship with their sponsoring parish will realize more vitality that is robust and strengthen future viability. Reviewing the relationship between the parish pastor and school principal as they set the tone for relationship building encourages interaction between stakeholders and set relationship expectations leading by example by being present, building rapport, and approachable which facilitates relationships and a sense of belonging.

Parish Vitality Factor 1: Integration of Organizational Structures

Themes: Mission and Philosophy, Governance, Financial Support, Strategic Planning

This factor evaluates how parish and school interact at the governance level. Organizational structure relationships are between organizational decision-makers and the policies and planning they establish. These TCRs have a significant and immediate impact on school operations. Parishes and schools that maintain a shared vision of the school as an integral aspect of the parish community demonstrate strong school vitality. Parochial school mission statements establish the purpose of the school's existence. Mission statements that include integration between the school and parish demonstrate an expectation that school and parish will foster a relationship. Inclusion of parish in the school and school in the parish mission statement affirms a commitment to each other and ingrain the school in the parish identity.

The parish and school governance expectations should be clearly defined and aligned, and governance boards and councils are intentionally interwoven. The governance theme recognizes the

hierarchical structure of the school. The pastor is the final decision-maker, with the principal maintaining the school's daily operations. Integrating decision-making entities establish relational trust. School boards and parish councils, finance councils, and advisory boards should include representation of both organizations to promote collaboration and foster positive relationships. Parish and school governance documents and planning could include language that expresses the reciprocal relationship between the school and the parish. Mission statements indicate the school to be an integral aspect of the parish identity. Strategic planning documents could outline how the school and parish will maintain and grow their relationship.

The financial support theme requires the parish to maintain a financial subsidy to the school and encourage parishioners to participate in school fundraising efforts. Parishes that provide financial support regardless of school financial need have a greater sense of school ownership. Additionally, it promotes financial oversight of the school to ensure its investment is utilized by the school appropriately. Financial oversight and budget approval of school finances by the parish provide the trust necessary to encourage parishioner support of school fundraisers and capital campaigns.

Strategic planning provides the road map for school development to ensure vitality. The parish and school governance include cross representation when undergoing future development planning. Integration of parish and school planning contributes to parish ownership of the school's future successes. Strategic planning and the other themes associated with organizational structure factors promote a shared vision through ensuring organizational alignment. Tightly coupled relationships committed to the school's vitality enable the school to handle future challenges better because of parish support.

Parish Vitality Factor 2: Development and Maintenance of Parish Identity

Themes: Communication, Ministry, Service, and Community Building

This factor highlights the importance of parishes expressing pride in their school and recognizes the school's value in parish identity. The factor reviews the LCRs that bind the school and parish together providing interwoven structures at the organizational level establishing the shared vision and mandate for schools and parishes to support each other. The LCRs exist between the stakeholders of each organization. The sense of pride parishioners and school students, parents, and staff feel for each other is the glue that binds school and parish together. The themes contributing to stakeholder relationship development are communication, ministry, service, and community building.

Exemplary schools maintain multiple forms of formal and informal communication. Formal communication like pulpit talks and newsletters allow access to the school that would not be present to most parish stakeholders. Parishioners cannot hold an opinion of a school's worth without information. Equally important is the use of informal communication. Principals and

pastors have significant influence. When principals and pastors interact with stakeholders regularly, they use their influence to improve or maintain stakeholder support. Keeping parishioners and parish staff informed of the school's operations and sharing the school's successes builds parish pride in the school. The pride a parish has for its school increases its willingness to support it. The communication theme represents how a school keeps its parish informed of its successes and events. Likewise, the parish's communication with school stakeholders regarding events and faith-building opportunities informs and welcomes school participation. Parishioners need frequent education on the benefit their parochial school provides. Informing the parish community of school success maintains parish pride in the school.

Student and school families' active participation in church contributes to school vitality. Participation in mass, sacramental, prayer devotionals, retreats, and other faith formation opportunities connect students to the parish. Parishioners see students engaging in ministry affirms the mission of the parish to provide religious formation to children therefore, solidify the school within the parish identity. Providing service for others builds pride, community, and relationships. Schools with strong vitality offer service opportunities for students to serve the parish. Additionally, they have significant parishioner volunteerism during the school day. Service opportunities connect parishioners and students to the value of parish life and increase positive sentiments.

The quantity and quality of interactions between school students, teachers, administration, parents, and parishioners directly affect the value parishioners have for the school. Relationships are the lifeblood of vitality and schools with excellent parish relationships put significant effort into providing meaningful engagement opportunities for stakeholders. Large parish and school social events engage the entire community while informal opportunities that present themselves daily build belief in each other. When parish and school communities identify, parish identity is strengthened. The stronger the parish identity, the more likely schools will be able to overcome challenging situations.

Conclusion

The study examined Catholic school viability and vitality seeking to understand impactful practices to maintain parish and school relationships to build a community ensuring school vitality. Re-imagining viability and vitality to include parish and school relationship factors provides tools schools can utilize for future success. Recognizing and taking steps to ensure the parochial school remains ingrained within the parish identity may give the extra stability necessary for struggling schools to overcome hardships. Reflecting upon prominent relationship factors such as organizational structure and parish identity allow parish communities to better understand and

value a reciprocal relationship. Parochial schools that intentionally evaluate their relationship with their sponsoring parish will realize robust vitality and strengthen future viability.

Parish and schools that create and maintain a shared vision are an integral aspect of the parish community. LCRs are the glue that binds the two organizations together allowing a school's parish identity to thrive. Schools with strong vitality work diligently to maintain a parish identity and parishes express pride in the school knowing the school is integral to the parish. Engagement helps parishioners feel connected to the school and share in the school's success. Parish pride increases a parish's willingness to support the school through its challenges with the school's vitality measured by the strength of their relationships. Parishes and schools must reflect upon their relationships and take actions that strengthen the school's parish identity to mitigate the potential risk of school closure or consolidation.

Bibliographic references

- Alber, S. (2011). *A Tool Kit for Action Research*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. Belmonte, A., & Cranston, N. (2009). The religious dimensions of lay leadership in Catholic schools: Preserving Catholic culture in an era of change. *Catholic Education: A journal of Inquiry and Practice* 12(3), 294-319.
- Brennan, T., K. (2011). Roman Catholic schooling in Ontario: past struggles, present challenges, future direction?. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 34(4), 20-30.
- Britt, K. (2013). Identification, description, and perceived viability of K-12 consolidated Catholic school systems. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 16(2), 335-363. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/160206213>
- Cook, T. J., & Simonds, S. (2011). The charism of 21st-Century Catholic schools: Building a culture of relationships. *Catholic Education (Dayton, Ohio)*, 14(3), 319. 10.15365/joce.1403042013
- Convey, J. (1999). Factors affecting bishops and priests about Catholic schools. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 2(3), 248-264.
- Crea, T.M., Reynolds, A.D., & Degnan, E. (2015). Parent engagement at a Cristo Rey high school: Building home-school partnerships in a multicultural immigrant community. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 19(1), 223-242.
- Frabutt, J.M., Holter, A.C., Nuzzi, R.J., Rocha, H., & Cassel, L. (2010). Pastors' views of parents and the parental role in Catholic education. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 14(1), 24-46.
- Frey, B.B., Pedrotti, J.T., Edwards, L., & McDermott, D. (2004). Cognitive spirituality and Catholic high school students. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, 7(4), 479-491.
- Goldschmidt, E. & Walsh, M. (2013). Urban Catholic elementary schools: What are the governance models? *Catholic Education (Dayton, Ohio)*, 17(1), 110. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1690550183>
- James, J. T., Tichy, K.L., Collin, A., & Schob, J. (2008). Developing a predictive metric to assess school viability. *Journal of Catholic Education* 11(4), 465-484.
- Lundy, G. F. (1999). School-parish financial linkages and the viability of the urban Catholic elementary schools. *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, 8(1), 85-106. <http://doi:10.1080/106562199094848883>
- Manning, P. R. (2018). Disintegrating worldviews and the future of Catholic education: Addressing deep roots of Catholic disaffiliation. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 21(2), 335-363. <http://dx.doi.org/10.12365/joce.2102022018>
- McDonald, D. & Schultz, M. M. (2010). *United States Catholic elementary and secondary schools 2009-2010: The annual statistical report on schools, enrollment and staffing*. Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association.
- McLaughlin, D. (2006). A school of the Human Person and for the Human Person. *British Journal of Religious Education* 22(3): 150-164.

- Murphy, D.J. (2002) *Catholic education at the crossroads*. Toronto, On: Catholic Registrar. National Catholic Education Association (NCEA). (2020). *Catholic School Data*. Retrieved from https://www.ncea.org/NCEA/Proclaim/Catholic_School_Data/NCEA/Proclaim/Catholic_School_Data/Catholic_School_Data.aspx?hkey=8e90e6aa-b9c4-456b-a488-6397f3640f05.
- Perl, P., & Gray, M., (2007). Catholic schooling and disaffiliation from Catholicism. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 46 (2).
- Salina, C., Girtz, S., & Eppinga, J. (2015). *Powerless to Powerful: Leadership for School Change*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Simonds, T.A., Brock, B.L., Cook, T.J., & Engel, M. (2017). Seminarian perspectives on Catholic schools and the new evangelization. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 20 (2), 98-108.
- Sultmann, W., & Brown, R. (2011). Modeling pillars of Catholic school identity: an Australian study. *International Studies in Catholic Education*, 3(1): 73-90.
- Weiss, S. (2007). Pastor-principal relationship in the parish school. *Journal of Catholic education*, 11(1), 7-22.
- Welsh, T., & Campbell, D. (2011). A house divided: Demographic change and the decline of Youngstown's parochial elementary schools. *American Educational History Journal*, 38(1), 159-178.
- West Catholic Education Association, (2012). *ISL Protocol*. Retrieved from <https://www.wcea.org/schools>
- West Catholic Education Association, (2012). *ISL Visiting Committee Manual*. Retrieved from <https://www.wcea.org/visiting-committee>
- Wolsonovich, N., Smilaycoff, M., & Ribera, M. (2018). A national study of regional Catholic school systems. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 21(2), 175-187. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.2102112018>

