

FOSTERING INTEGRAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT: A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE ON WHOLE CHILD EDUCATION

FAVORISER LE DÉVELOPPEMENT HUMAIN INTÉGRAL : UNE PERSPECTIVE CATHOLIQUE SUR L'ÉDUCATION GLOBALE DE L'ENFANT

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Abstract In the post-pandemic era, holistic education has gained prominence, particularly within the U.S. Catholic educational sector, as evidenced by the Roche Center for Catholic Education's convening at Boston College in June 2022. This gathering led to the development of the first conceptual Framework for Whole Child Education in Catholic Schools, aimed at fostering comprehensive development across physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and spiritual domains. This paper explores this framework through the lens of Christian anthropology, integrating insights from Catholic theology, Ignatian spirituality, and the socio-educational philosophies endorsed by Pope Francis. By detailing the framework's core beliefs—*cura personalis*, accompaniment, *Dios en Todo*, *Imago Dei*, and *Magis*—and their practical applications within diverse educational settings, the paper illustrates their profound impact on educational practices and student experiences in Catholic schools. Two case studies from the Diocese of Arlington and Archbishop Borders School highlight how these principles are operationalized to support inclusive education and nurture a holistic approach to student development, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of integral human formation in varied cultural and economic contexts.

Keywords Integral Human Development, Holistic Education, Whole Child Education, Pope Francis, Theological Foundations

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Résumé Dans l'ère post-pandémique, l'éducation holistique a pris de l'importance, en particulier au sein du secteur éducatif catholique américain, comme en témoigne le Roche Center for Catholic Education. L'éducation s'est réunie au Boston College en juin 2022. Ce rassemblement a conduit à l'élaboration de le premier cadre conceptuel pour l'éducation globale de l'enfant dans les écoles catholiques, visant à favoriser un développement global sur les plans physique, cognitif, social, émotionnel et spirituel domaines. Cet article explore ce cadre à travers le prisme de l'anthropologie chrétienne, intégrant des idées de la théologie catholique, de la spiritualité ignatienne et du milieu socio-éducatif philosophies approuvées par le pape François. En détaillant les convictions fondamentales du framework : *cura personalis*, accompagnement, *Dios en Todo*, *Imago Dei* et *Magis* – et leurs pratiques applications dans divers contextes éducatifs, l'article illustre leur profond impact sur pratiques éducatives et expériences des élèves dans les écoles catholiques. Deux études de cas du Le diocèse d'Arlington et l'Archbishop Borders School soulignent à quel point ces principes sont opérationnalisés pour soutenir l'éducation inclusive et nourrir une approche holistique de l'élève développement, contribuant ainsi à une compréhension plus large de la formation humaine intégrale dans contextes culturels et économiques variés.

Mots-clés Développement humain intégral, éducation holistique, éducation globale de l'enfant, Pape François, Fondements théologiques

Introduction

Across the United States, around 1.6 million PK-12 students were enrolled in nearly 6,000 Catholic schools in the 2022-2023 academic year (NCEA, 2022). Many of these schools' mission statements speak of their commitment to educating the whole child or taking a holistic approach to education, which is more important than ever in these post-pandemic years. Recognizing the great need for a shared understanding of holistic education in our Catholic schools— one that embodies a Christian anthropology of the human person— the Roche Center for Catholic Education at Boston College gathered researchers, practitioners, and philanthropists from throughout the United States for a Whole Child Convening at Boston College in June 2022. “The impact of our ever-changing society on schools creates an urgency... to re-examine education, as well as an opportunity to recommit... to educating the whole child by tending to all the domains of development: physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and spiritual” (Wytttenbach, McMahon, and Pileggi-Proud, 2023, p. 2). Out of this convening came the first conceptual Framework for Whole Child Education in Catholic Schools (figure 1). In this paper we will explore the framework for Whole Child Education, provide an overview of the core beliefs that animate the philosophy of this holistic approach, and provide two real world examples from a Diocese and a school living out these beliefs in the United States.

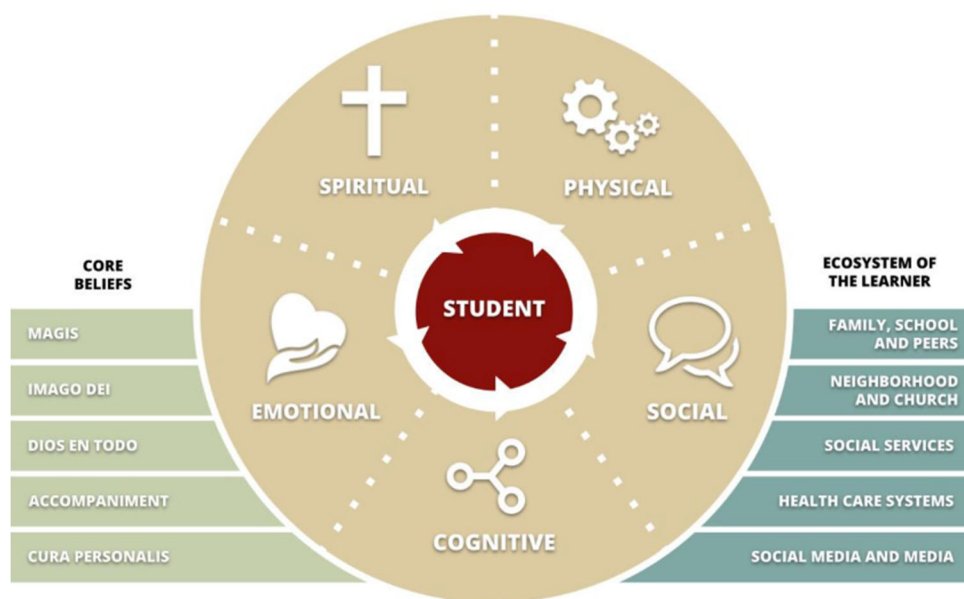


Figure 1: Framework for Whole Child Education in Catholic Schools (Wytttenbach, McMahon, and Pileggi-Proud, 2023)

A Framework Defining Whole Child Education

Whole child education adopts a comprehensive approach that addresses the cognitive, social, physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of learning. As a beloved child of God, each student has an eternal destiny as well as a calling for this life. The domains of the Whole Child Framework are interconnected and growth in one domain should be accompanied by growth in the others. The development of this framework was shaped by five core beliefs that are animated by the Catholic theological tradition, Ignatian spirituality, and by Pope Francis’ leadership and vision for Catholic education. These five core beliefs of *cura personalis*, accompaniment, *Dios en Todo*, *Imago Dei*, and *Magis* undergird not only the spiritual domain, but the cognitive, social, physical, and emotional domains as well.

The Framework for Whole Child Education in Catholic Schools is also influenced by an attentiveness to the ecosystem of the learner, recognizing that whole child education occurs through dynamic engagement with the family, the local and greater communities, and even with a global society. It is important to note that, “by design, the Roche Center model creates space for iterative, collaborative exploration of whole child policies, practices, and measurement” (Wytttenbach, McMahon, and Pileggi-Proud, 2023, p. 9). Just as this framework was developed through dialogue with researchers and practitioners, we find that exploring the praxis of Catholic schools helps us to study further the incarnation of this theoretical framework, bringing up further questions for dialogue and research. Indeed, “vision without appropriate method may be perceived as sterile platitude, while method without unifying vision is frequently passing fashion

or gadgetry” (Kolvenbach, S.J., 1993). Therefore, we intentionally nurture a symbiotic relationship between researcher and practitioner, all in service of the children in our schools.

In contemplating integral human development in the Catholic schools of today, we draw inspiration from Pope Francis’ vision for Catholic education, which is expansive, as we heard from him at the launching of the Global Compact on Education. He asks Catholic educators for an approach that is creative and filled with hope, an approach that engages all aspects of a global society in service of every child. In his earlier 2018 address to members of the “Gravissimum Educationis” Foundation, Pope Francis emphasized that only “by changing education can we change the world.” Pope Francis situated this call to change education with the context of a global society. For Francis, Catholic educators must nurture hope within themselves so as to “offer hope to the global world of today.”

“A globalization bereft of hope or vision can easily be conditioned by economic interests, which are often far removed from a correct understanding of the common good, and which easily give rise to social tensions, economic conflicts and abuses of power. We need to give a soul to the global world through an intellectual and moral formation that can support the good things that globalization brings and correct the harmful ones” (Pope Francis, 2018a).

The Whole Child Framework calls for such engagement with the entire ecosystem of the learner, confident that such an enterprise will be fruitful as it is rooted in five core beliefs that give enduring strength and hope.

Animating Beliefs of the Whole Child Framework

In this section we outline the foundational beliefs of the Whole Child Framework. These beliefs are informed by the rich philosophical Catholic tradition of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), spiritual writings from church leadership. We outline succinctly these five beliefs- *Cura personalis*, accompaniment, *Imago Dei*, *Magis*, and *Dios en Todo*- and provide examples of their relevance in Catholic schools.

Cura personalis, or “care for the whole person,” is well known at Jesuit institutions in the United States and emphasizes the importance of an attentiveness to “holistic education that attends to the spiritual and moral dimensions of a person in addition to his or her intellectual development” (Geger, 2014, p. 6). There is a danger for the reader in the United States, and perhaps in the West in general, that *cura personalis* may be understood in simply an individualistic sense. Research invites us beyond such an individualistic interpretation of *cura personalis*, looking to the Global South with a focus on Latin America for rich insights (Warner, Wyttenbach, and McMahon, 2023). Examining the insights of the Jesuit Conference of Latin American Provincials, we see that *cura personalis* is interwoven with accompaniment. As God accompanies us, so we are called to accompany others, and to allow ourselves to be accompanied as well. In light of God’s special love

for the suffering, vulnerable, and poor, Pope Francis frequently calls us to go to the margins and to pay particular attention to those forgotten or scorned in our world.

Recognizing the complexities and challenges of the current global reality, Pope Francis said in his 2019 message for the launch of the Global Compact on Education: “Never before has there been such need to unite our efforts in a broad *educational alliance*, to form mature individuals capable of overcoming division and antagonism, and to restore the fabric of relationships for the sake of a more fraternal humanity.” In order to form such individuals, we foster integral human development through tending to all domains of the Whole Child Framework, in partnership with the ecosystem of the learner. As we attend to *cura personalis* and accompaniment in our Catholic schools, we seek to form our students to live lives of service and of love.

As every person is made in the image and likeness of God, they have immeasurable dignity. While some ideologies seek to reduce the person to one aspect of their being, or simply see them as having a role to play in society, the core belief in the *Imago Dei* points us towards the transcendent dimension of the person that illuminates all aspects of their being and eternal destiny. Therefore, we believe in the importance of the Whole Child Framework being attentive to the presence of God in diverse cultures, the importance of equitable opportunities for all of God’s children to receive a whole child education, and to be truly inclusive and welcoming of all. Teacher formation and preparation is particularly important for schools to live out a culturally responsive pedagogy that honors the dignity of every child.

The core belief of *Magis* is deeply related to St. Ignatius’ motto *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*– “for the greater glory of God.” As we are anchored in our core beliefs, we strive for the *magis*, to develop and actualize our unique gifts in community for the greater glory of God. For us as Catholic educators, to live the *magis* requires magnanimity, or a “greatness of spirit.” “For Ignatius...magnanimity is a readiness to ‘think big,’ to embrace projects of grand scope. But it also includes, of necessity, a willingness to endure the additional conflicts that come with having that greatness of spirit” (Geger, 2012, p. 26). Researchers and practitioners alike are called to this greatness of spirit as we explore and practice the Whole Child Framework. The Whole Child Framework seeks to form students who are likewise inspired to strive for the *magis* in all that they do.

The core belief in God in all things, or *Dios en Todo*, is expressed in Spanish as a reminder that God may be encountered in every person, culture, and facet of the ecosystem of the learner. “The Catholic tradition teaches that in the mystery of the Incarnation, God entered into human culture at a specific moment in history. Jesus Christ entered fully into the human experience through the Israelite culture and language and He encounters every person today in their own culture and language” (Wyttenbach, Grejdus, and Browne, 2024, n.p.). The Whole Child Framework’s emphasis on intentional engagement with the ecosystem of the learner helps children and their

families to be strengthened and affirmed in their cultural and linguistic heritages. Through a communal discernment of *Dios en Todo*, within the ecosystem of the learner, we “affect the heart of society” and help to “give birth to a new culture” in a global society (Pope Francis, 2020).

As previously mentioned, the Whole Child Framework was developed through dialogue with researchers and practitioners. What do these core beliefs look like in action within school communities and in dialogue with the ecosystem of the learner? Through exploring concrete examples of core beliefs in action in Catholic schools, we gain further insight into the value and power of the Whole Child Framework, as well as glean further questions for research.

Core Beliefs in Action within the Diocese of Arlington, Virginia:

Imago Dei

As schools seek to implement and strengthen Whole Child Education, who is the student at the center of the domains of the Framework for Whole Child Education? Does this student in the Whole Child Framework (see figure one) include children with intellectual special needs? In Catholic schools in the United States, an increasingly growing number of dioceses, are intentionally more inclusive of children with exceptionalities, including the Diocese of Arlington.

While public schools in the United States are mandated to be accessible by children with special needs and therefore receive public funding designated for this, private schools typically lack such financial resources. Beyond the financial considerations, there can be fear and hesitancy from a school community when considering welcoming children with special needs. As Dr. Joe Vorbach, Superintendent of Catholic Schools in the Diocese of Arlington, shared,

“One of the understandable fears is that there’s so much that already needs to be accommodated for students with dyslexia, executive functioning issues, attention deficit, sometimes... anxiety and depression. There’s a lot already happening. And so a natural fear of teachers is ‘and then I’m going to be asked to do this?’ And yet, while teachers are constantly in search of more knowledge and professional development, their overall response to greater inclusion has been incredible” (J. Vorbach, personal communication, October 18, 2023).

The financial considerations for providing additional support and the need for trained specialists are real and substantial, but it is precisely in the face of these concerns that the invitation to trust exists. Genuine trust is not naive or based in utopian ideals— rather, it is pragmatic and animated by grace. The three most recent pontiffs— Saint John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis— have been consistent and clear in their emphasis regarding the sacred dignity of every person with special needs (Boyle, 2020, p. 5). Pope Francis, speaking to a group with special needs in 2022, and referencing insights from John Paul II said,

“Welcoming people with disabilities and responding to their needs is a duty of the civil and ecclesial community, because ‘even when disabled persons are mentally impaired or when their sensory or intellectual capacity is damaged, they are fully human beings and possess the sacred and inalienable rights that belong to every human creature’” (Francis, 2022; quoting John Paul II, 2004).

Francis emphasizes that because of the *Imago Dei*, inclusion must not simply be a slogan, and it must not be limited to physical accessibility, but must encompass a “spirituality of communion” that reflects the love that Jesus has for each of us.

How then might a Catholic diocese or a Catholic school prepare to open their hearts and doors to children with special needs? While the theology inspiring such a decision may be clear, to what extent is it possible in reality? We invited Dr. Vorbach to share the history of the Catholic Schools of the Diocese of Arlington, Virginia in this regard. The Diocese of Arlington currently has 37 parish schools and 4 high schools. All 4 high schools admit students with intellectual disabilities and 15 of the parish schools do as well. The genesis for this commitment to children with special needs originated in the work of parents in the Diocese of Arlington 25 years ago. “A group of parents...earnestly wanted to make it possible for their children with Down Syndrome to attend the Catholic high school and to have the same kind of Catholic high school experience that their siblings might be having” at Pope Paul VI High School in Virginia, “and the school responded and has never looked back” (J. Vorbach, personal communication, October 18, 2023). The parents— a critical aspect of the ecosystem of the learner— raised money, ignited inspiration, and helped to bring about a formalized program of support at Paul VI High School for children with special needs. This parent group has since been formalized into Porto Charities, a 501 (c)(3) and continues to expand the ways it supports students with special needs in the Diocese of Arlington.

Another key aspect of the ecosystem of the learner— the neighborhood and church— is critical to their success. The bishop of Arlington granted permission for parishes throughout the Diocese of Arlington to do a voluntary second collection for Porto Charities, which signifies a diocesan public commitment to supporting the inclusion of children with special needs. Over half of the parishes in the diocese take part in this collection, which is a meaningful way for all of God’s faithful in the Diocese of Arlington to become a part of this mission.

Schools in the Diocese of Arlington began to see what was possible, thanks to the inaugural commitment at Paul VI High School and to the diocesan-wide support provided by the Bishop as well as many parishes. Prior to becoming Superintendent of Catholic Schools, Dr. Vorbach was the Head of School at Bishop O’Connell High School in Arlington, Virginia. We asked him to share his discernment and experience of welcoming students with intellectual disabilities in 2014. The school began with welcoming three students with intellectual disabilities, and Dr. Vorbach said of this experience:

“...a big takeaway for me was that this...was a situation where the leap of faith taken was borne out of our confidence that we had done a decent amount of due diligence. And when we leapt, we leapt with faith and with amazing support from our teachers. And God has been really good to O’Connell High School in this regard since then because...there are somewhere between 12 and 15 students annually...benefiting from this program at this school alone” (J. Vorbach, personal communication, October 18, 2023).

Anchored in the core belief of the *Imago Dei*, inspired and supported by the ecosystem of the learner, particularly the parents, Bishop O’Connell High School invested in professional development for faculty and staff. Part of their commitment to welcoming children with intellectual disabilities was to do this well. As the students with special needs learned, the whole community learned. “A student with Down Syndrome learning in your classroom is a very present manifestation of the fact that...everyone can learn and that everyone learns differently, which is true of all the other brains in the room too. So...teaching becomes better and community gets stronger” (J. Vorbach, personal communication, October 18, 2023). As schools learned how to better support children with intellectual special needs, there was a congruent deepening of understanding how to better support children with emotional, social, or spiritual special needs—needs that may not be as visible but that are just as real. In delighting in these children with Down Syndrome or another special need, a fundamental truth about the human person was revealed and confirmed— that every person is sacred and every person is a gift.

An important aspect of welcoming students with special needs in the Catholic high schools in the Diocese of Arlington is the support provided by peer mentors, taught and coached by expert teachers. High school students accompany students with special needs to their classes, help them to study, and sometimes collaborate with the teacher in order to differentiate instruction. The peer mentors would be the first to say that they often receive more than their mentees do, for as they accompany, they find that they themselves are the ones accompanied and that they grow in all five domains of the Framework for Whole Child Education. One peer mentor shared, “I have changed tremendously working with my mentee, Henry. He’s taught me many things that apply to any situation. He’s one of the main reasons I want to attend school every day” (Mcgowan, 2019). Peer mentors often admired the openness and pure love shared by their mentees. By committing to inclusion, these peer mentors and their school communities ended up receiving the gift of all-inclusive love and welcome from these children with special needs.

Recognizing the fear and uncertainty that can make it challenging for a school or a diocese to begin the discernment process regarding welcoming children with special needs, Dr. Vorbach advised:

“Enter into a very intentional discernment process that includes the solicitation of advice and perspective from those who are the key stakeholders, in other words parents who have children with intellectual disabilities, teachers who have special education background working with these students, other schools that have walked the path ahead of you. That would be the first thought.

And then the second would be, having done that, go forward knowing that it's very possible. Take that first step.” (J. Vorbach, personal communication, October 18, 2023).

As we come to honor the image of God, the *Imago Dei*, in each person and culture, moving beyond fear towards trust and hope, we are invited to listen to the words of Jesus in the Gospel of John: “Come and see.” For those who wrestle with the very real financial and capacity questions that must be faced if we are to welcome children with special needs into our schools— “come and see” what is happening in these schools in the Diocese of Arlington and in other parts of the United States and world.

Core Beliefs in Action at Archbishop Borders School, Baltimore, Maryland, USA; Member School of Boston College’s Two-Way Immersion Network (TWIN)

Dios en Todo

Leaders and teachers from 28 schools throughout the United States converge every summer for a dynamic week of professional development with Boston College’s Two-Way Immersion Network (TWIN). While instruction and daily activities are typically conducted in English in schools in the United States, these TWIN schools are committed to dual language immersion, also known as two-way immersion, which centers and cultivates students’ languages and cultures. Many of these schools are Spanish-English programs, others are Mandarin-English, and one school, located on a Native American reservation in South Dakota, is Lakota-English.

This week reflects the vibrant cultures of these school communities, with full days of academically rigorous professional development and evenings of music, dancing, and laughter. In the United States’ current political landscape, which holds many debates and tensions about immigration, it is a distinct contrast to engage with these educators who are deeply committed to *Dios en Todo— God in All Things*. They invite us to think with the mind and heart of Christ and the Church rather than with political parties. The joy and richness of the Gospel animates this time and space.

One of these 28 schools is Archbishop Borders PK3-8 School in Baltimore, Maryland. Archbishop Borders School dates back to 1876, and originally served German immigrants. Catholic parochial school systems in the United States were instituted by the immigrant bishop, Saint John Neumann, and have a rich history of being of and for immigrant communities. Archbishop Borders continues in this tradition today, now serving immigrants primarily from Latin America as well as from Africa, Europe, and Asia. This is a relative rarity in Catholic schools in the United States. Only around 2% of Hispanic children in the United States are enrolled at Catholic schools, despite the fact that over 41% of the nearly 70 million Catholics in the United States identify as Hispanic (Ospino & Wyttenbach, 2022). Many of the students at Archbishop Borders School are first generation, having been born in the United States, and they draw from numerous vibrant communities from over 35 area towns.

Archbishop Borders School is the only full immersion dual language Catholic school in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. The decision to become a dual language school was made in 2010 and was rooted in a deep belief in *Dios en Todo* and in a commitment to living the belief of accompaniment. While many Catholic schools in the United States struggle to stay open, due to financial and enrollment difficulties, the leadership of Archbishop Borders recognized the deep faith of these immigrant communities and were confident that the desire for a Catholic education was there. By discerning *Dios en Todo* in all facets of the ecosystem of the learner, Archbishop Borders has been able to truly engage families, neighborhoods, and churches, in support of whole child education.

This belief in *Dios en Todo* guides the school's approach to enrollment, student support, teacher recruitment and formation, and dual language education. The financial needs and struggles are very real for this school community. Mrs. Amy Belz, the principal, shared that when considering students who have limited financial resources, "we want these kids to come to our school. So we have to be creative, and think outside the box a bit, and look at the net gain we have, not just financially, but from taking a family in from adding to the diversity, adding the cultural aspects that this family would bring, and knowing that we want to teach each child" (A. Belz & K. Ramos, personal communication, October 11, 2023). Anchored in their root beliefs, the leadership team accompanies families and advocates for funding and donations from various sources.

Faculty and staff retention is currently strong at Archbishop Borders School, which is a sign of the strength of their community. Faculty and staff draw from 11 countries, bringing their linguistic and cultural heritages with them into the ecosystem of the learner. They are trained and supported in all domains of the Whole Child Framework. Much of this training is anchored in faith and spirituality, with half days of retreat built in once a month as well as a full retreat day once a year. The school leadership finds that the incredibly deep spirituality of many of their faculty and staff from other countries truly infuses these formation experiences and the school community is thereby strengthened.

As the school accompanies the students and families, the school is likewise accompanied by the tremendous gifts that these children and their families bring with them. There is a culture of love and acceptance within the school community, and the family-school partnership is very strong. Mrs. Belz and Mrs. Ramos note this profound sense of family, spirituality, and faith that is so present among many from Latin America. "It is in the family and the community where Hispanic Catholics primarily develop our cultural and ecclesial identity, indeed a countercultural conviction in a society in which focus on the individual tends to prevail" (Ospino, 2010, p. 417). Such a strong sense of family identity animates the domains of Whole Child Education in multifaceted ways. For example, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS) is highly effective at Borders, due in part to the family partnership, which is animated by values of honesty,

ownership, and community support. The school leadership, in partnership with families, is attentive to honoring the dignity of each person and restoring relationships through consistent structure and mediation.

As Archbishop Borders School has found, "...there is shared wisdom in [the] family-centered paradigm and collectivist heritage that challenges the status quo and provides new horizons for how Catholic school leaders and educators approach the classroom, marketing, enrollment management, advocacy, and community partnerships" (Wytttenbach, Funk, & Browne, 2022, p. 89). To move beyond fear towards a trusting and hope-filled engagement with families and all ecosystems of the learner brings in extraordinary social capital and a powerful synergy in support of every child and their education.

Conclusion

As Catholic schools seek to discern and live out core beliefs as they foster integral human development in partnership with the ecosystem of the learner, we find these words from Pope Francis, while not directed to educators specifically, to be very meaningful for us as we seek to move towards trust. As Pope Francis reminds us:

"Having doubts and fears is not a sin... The sin is to allow these fears to determine our responses, to limit our choices, to compromise respect and generosity, to feed hostility and rejection... The sin is to refuse to encounter the other, the different, the neighbor, when this is in fact a privileged opportunity to encounter the Lord ... to overcome our fears so as to encounter the other, to welcome, to know and to acknowledge him or her" (2018b).

In this engagement with the ecosystem of the learner, educators can draw inspiration from Francis by practicing attentiveness through listening and dialogue with all domains, thus infusing our educational enterprise with a spirit of joy. Just as the Framework for Whole Child Education was developed in dialogue with researchers, practitioners, and philanthropists, we draw further insights as well as further questions for research through examining the praxis of dioceses and schools, such as within the Diocese of Arlington and at Archbishop Borders Catholic School. In a global society and a universal church, we recommend that further research draw insights from Catholic schools in other countries. What does integral human development look like in the Global South? Europe? In the Far East? Where are there points of synergy and where are there opportunities for productive inquiry? We find great hope in the possibilities that live within a spirit of fraternal dialogue.

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