



Catholic School Vitality

The American Medical Association recommends regular check-ups and annual physical exams as tools for maintaining vitality. The annual physical can determine the current state of an individual's overall health and diagnose problems before they become serious. During the exam, the doctor conducts a series of tests that will examine a patient's vital signs along with how well all organs are functioning. The major benefit of the annual visit to the doctor is that the patient can learn about his or her individual level of health as well as steps to take in order to maintain optimal physical health. After measuring weight, blood pressure, and heart rate, doctors often suggest that the patient eat right, exercise more, and reduce stress in order to enjoy a fuller, healthier life.

Likewise, it is prudent for schools to take an annual "*physical*" to determine their current state of health and to maintain vitality. Each year it is important to make sure that all aspects of school life are functioning at optimal performance so that the school is able to fulfill its mission. Establishing healthy habits and diagnosing problems early will enable a school to develop a "*prescription*" for improvement that will result in a more vigorous school that can better serve its students and families.

The vital role of Catholic schools in the life of the Church has been addressed on numerous occasions by Catholic leaders since the 1960s (e.g., Vatican II, 1965a; The [Sacred] Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, 1982, 1988, 1997; National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1972). As the National Congress on Catholic Schools for the 21st Century (Catholic School Congress) says:

Catholic schools are deeply rooted in the life of the church, the body of Jesus Christ, who is the source of all life. Catholic schools draw their life's breath from their roots in the Catholic community and they, in turn, breathe new life into the Church. (Guerra, Haney, & Kealey, 1991, Prologue).

The life of the school is connected to the life of the Church; therefore, it is critical that we maintain vitality in Catholic schools for the future of our Church.

This year, several articles have been written by members of the Department of Elementary Schools Executive Committee (DESEC) to address important aspects of vitality for elementary schools. Topics that will be forthcoming in the series include:

- **Consumerism**, i.e., marketing, which will focus on enrollment and admissions to help school leaders understand the importance of continuing to grow their schools;
- **Community**, which addresses the need to create a welcoming environment so that stakeholders feel that they truly belong;
- **Special Needs**, which often involves stretching resources to include students and families that do not necessarily fit the typical profile of a Catholic school graduate;
- **Parent-School Partnership**, which research indicates is critical for student success and the Church maintains is required by recognizing parents as the primary educators;
- **Catholic Culture**, which is the heart of the program, establishing the school's authenticity as a ministry of the Church;
- **Curriculum**, which communicates to all stakeholders and community members the importance of high expectations and educational excellence;
- **Accountability**, which is necessary to monitor the effectiveness of the school's mission; and,
- **Development**, which is as much about friend-raising as it is about fund-raising as schools consider their future health.

The DESEC Board has designed this year's series of articles to assist school leaders in their efforts to preserve and improve the energy, vivacity, liveliness, strength, life, and vigor of the school. In other words, we will strive to maintain vitality so that our schools continue to be institutions in which children thrive. As we begin this school year, we pray that all of our schools are blessed with a happy and healthy new year!

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