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## Higher Education Working Together to Help Catholic Schools: The Greater Milwaukee Catholic Education Consortium

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*This essay was developed from a panel presentation by Henk and Maney, as well as other key professional colleagues, delivered at the 2012 CHEC Conference. The essay describes the formation and initial work of a consortium of five institutions of higher education in the greater Milwaukee area, including Alverno College, Cardinal Stritch University, Marian University, Marquette University, and Mount Mary College.*

**A**cross the nation, numerous Catholic schools have struggled to exist, let alone thrive. In the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, one in every five schools has closed its doors over the past 15 years. As academics who work in the five Catholic institutions of higher education (CIHE) in the greater Milwaukee area, we have witnessed and lamented these struggles over the years. Each of our colleges and universities has tried, in its own way, to help when called upon, but the breadth and depth of the challenges facing urban Catholic schools has continued to outstrip our individual institutions' ability to contend with them. The issues were systemic and intractable in nature, and none of us had the singular capacity to make differences that were far reaching enough.

Eventually, we concluded that helping our local P-12 Catholic schools, at scale, would require working together in a unified, coordinated, and selfless manner. That conclusion gave rise to a new model of collaboration, now known as the Greater Milwaukee Catholic Education Consortium (GMCEC). The model is described here along with its early history. We see this recounting as a fitting addition to this focus section of the *Journal*, one which summarizes the Catholic Higher Education Collaborative's (CHEC) 2012 conference on Catholic school governance. The GMCEC served as the event's host and the Consortium's model was shared in a key panel discus-

sion. Our partnership not only assists Catholic schools with governance, but also represents a unique form of multi-institutional governance in its own right.

### Responding to a Call to Action

The trials and tribulations faced in Milwaukee will sound all too familiar to anyone who knows the K-12 Catholic education sector, particularly in urban and rural areas. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in its 2005 pastoral statement, *Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium*, described current trends in Catholic education that threaten its future. Numbered among these obstacles are declining enrollments and sharply rising tuition. But the difficulties hardly stop there. Attempts to prevent school closings, and to facilitate mergers and consolidations, have occurred in urban and Catholic schools in Milwaukee and elsewhere. The mergers are often unsuccessful. Moreover, Catholic schools reflect a shifting student demographic that is frequently not Catholic and is increasingly diverse.

Compounding the challenges, there have been reverberations that academic quality has diminished. This concern is obviously a serious one, because even devout families will hesitate or wholly refrain from sending their children to Catholic schools whose records of advancing student achievement are suspect. Equally important, the escalating shortage of vowed religious professionals on staff, which has endangered school sustainability by driving up labor costs for several years, has jeopardized even more so the tradition of faith development assured by their clerical presence. Regrettably, the combination of these issues has resulted in a significant downward spiral, where the very real peril exists that only select, non-diverse, and affluent parish-operated Catholic schools will survive. Clearly, the schools of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee are not immune to these trends, as many of them remain decidedly at risk.

The pastoral statement of the Bishops also included a specific appeal to Catholic colleges and universities to address problems like those described above. To formulate a local response, our Catholic institutions of higher education (CIHE) in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee (Alverno College, Cardinal Stritch University, Marian University, Marquette University, and Mount Mary College) came together to form the *Greater Milwaukee Catholic Educa-*

*tion Consortium* (GMCEC). The purpose of the partnership was to marshal the academic resources and professional expertise of the region's CIHEs to build enduring connections that strengthen and sustain quality Catholic education. Specifically, the GMCEC's aspirations were twofold:

1. To exert a transformational impact on Catholic elementary and secondary schools in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee
2. To become a national model for ways in which Catholic higher education collaborations might support P-12 schools through the professional development of educators, the transmission and modeling of best practices in faith formation, and the improvement of schools' organizational effectiveness.

### Origins of the GMCEC

In January 2007, leadership in the School of Education at Marquette University came to believe that, despite its own current and past efforts to support Milwaukee's diocesan schools, more needed to be done. Accordingly, a focused discussion was convened to examine the following issues in depth:

- The major challenges facing Catholic schools
- General strategies that would address these challenges
- Specific actions Catholic institutions of higher education could take to be especially helpful in those respects

The discussion was purposely planned to coincide with the visit of Dr. Karen Ristau, President of the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA), whose insights proved to be invaluable. A small group of Marquette facilitators led approximately 25 Catholic school leaders, teachers, board members, clergy, and other constituents from across the Archdiocese, as well as a small number of local college and university representatives in addressing these topics. It is important to note that Marquette University originally intended to explore how it alone might help. The notion of a partnership had not yet emerged.

As it turned out, the Catholic school leaders and community members in attendance expressed urgent pleas for assistance. Their concerns centered on the three primary themes reflected in the GMCEC's collaborative work:

professional development, Catholic identity and faith formation, and organizational effectiveness.

Given the scope and gravity of the challenges and the modest size of the Marquette School of Education, a decision was made to approach a respected peer institution, Alverno College, about forming a partnership. Fortunately, the Alverno colleagues wholeheartedly embraced the proposition, and the newly formed higher education partnership set out to gather as much information as possible about Catholic education centers, institutes, and collaborations around the country, especially in urban areas. This data collection included discussions or visits with Boston College's Lynch School of Education and its Roche Center for Catholic Education, Creighton University and its Magis program, Loyola University Chicago's Center for Catholic School Effectiveness, St. Louis University, and St. Thomas University. In addition, there was a thorough examination of the Notre Dame report on the future of Catholic schools (2006), driven by its Alliance for Catholic Education, as well as other print and web-based materials germane to the inquiry.

The findings indicated that a wide range of models existed for archdiocesan and Catholic higher education collaborations and that the emphases of these alliances varied markedly. Focusing on the three core areas previously identified seemed defensible, and if the Consortium were to be expanded regionally, there would be ways to contribute to the national Catholic education landscape in niches such as school governance.

For several months, Alverno and Marquette worked together before the decision was made to reach out to the other three CIHEs. As a result of discussions with other knowledgeable and passionate Catholic school supporters—especially the Stollenwerk Family Foundation—invitations to join the partnership were extended to Cardinal Stritch University, Marian University, and Mount Mary College. (see Table 1 for a description of each member institution). Education deans from all five institutions, along with representatives from the Archdiocese's Office for Schools and its Education Advisory Committee, met and reached universal agreement on the value of the consortium. This consensus resulted in the formal establishment of the GMCEC partnership, in which all institutions would support the joint work in equal measure, primarily through in-kind contributions of academic and administrative expertise.

Marquette University serves as the GMCEC's fiscal agent and is the physical home of its institutional coordinator. The consortium is governed

Table 1

*Greater Milwaukee Catholic Education Consortium Member Institutions*

Institution	Description
Alverno College	Longtime leader in the field of teacher education, whose work with ability-based education and performance-based assessment is recognized nationally and internationally. Education at the college derives from a liberal arts tradition, with particular focus on integrative, experiential and reflective approaches to learning.
Cardinal Stritch University	A leader in innovative programs rooted in liberal arts with a focus on life-long learning. The university is a large provider of teachers in the region, and through its Saint Clare Center for Catholic Life provides education and formation for lay Catholics who seek to grow in faith and service.
Marian University	A liberal arts institution that welcomes diverse spiritual traditions. The institution is committed to the transformation of the individual and the world through life-long learning, and it represents a leader in the use of technology in education.
Marquette University	A national research university focused on the tenets of excellence, faith, leadership, and service, and dedicated to social justice and the education and welfare of all children. The university exhibits special strength in scholarship and resource acquisition that benefits the GMCEC.
Mount Mary College	A liberal arts institution focused on leadership, integrity, and a deep sense of social justice arising from sensitivity to moral values and Christian principles. Mount Mary is committed to excellence in teaching and learning with an emphasis on critical thinking.

by a board that consists of two members from each institution and a liaison from the Archdiocese of Milwaukee's Office for Schools. The consortium interacts with the Superintendent of Schools and three associate superintendents to develop and execute plans for organizing the collective strength of the academic resources and professional expertise.

### Progress to Date

The impact of the Consortium can best be captured through three primary areas of emphasis.

**Professional development.** All five GMCEC institutions are positioned to provide practicing teachers, standing administrators, and aspiring admin-

istrators with in-services, workshops, consulting, and formal coursework to help them embrace best pedagogical and leadership practices. This particular emphasis of the Consortium is rich in resources, but requires considerable institutional coordination. As a by-product of our work together, each institution now infuses its existing undergraduate teacher education curricula with a greater emphasis on Catholic social teaching.

**Mission and identity.** The consortium is likewise strong in the domain of mission and identity, or faith formation. In fact, long before the GMCEC took shape, some key members of the partnership worked together with the Archdiocese around these goals in a group called ATIC or the Archdiocesan Theology Implementation Committee. Now, as part of the work, a new group known as the STAFF committee (an acronym for Schools, Theology, and Faith Formation) serves as the foundation for the GMCEC in supporting the faith formation of P-12 Catholic educators through two innovative programs rooted in religious education.

STAFF was charged by former Milwaukee Archbishop Timothy Dolan (now the Cardinal of New York City) to expand the scope of its work to include the development of appropriate theological competence standards and faith formation expectations for each of the following groups: Catholic school principals, Catholic elementary school teachers, Catholic high school teachers, Catholic high school theology teachers, and, Catholic school boards. Since 2009, the STAFF Program, developed by the Saint Clare Center for Catholic Life at Cardinal Stritch University at the GMCEC's request, has trained school teams to attend to the development of Catholic school *culture* by the intentional development of adult faith communities among teaching staffs. The program has served more than 175 teachers and principals from 36 schools thus far. The Saint Clare Center administers and coordinates the program, which offers graduate credit to participants.

**Organizational effectiveness.** Organizational effectiveness is a multifaceted theme that includes work in areas such as finance, fundraising, governance, human resources, public advocacy, technology, data analysis and research, and strategic planning. It remains the most challenging element for the GMCEC to orchestrate. Executive-level support is critical to formulating GMCEC's message to the college and university communities that address Catholic schools matters. Each institution's president, all of whom participated in a panel discussion at the CHEC summit (an account of which is included on pp. 172–175), has taken steps in that direction.



### **Bridging the Present and the Future**

The combined capacity of the GMCEC keeps P-12 Catholic education not only alive but also vibrant in Milwaukee. Through collaboration, the GMCEC enhances, facilitates, and launches programs and other supports that are strengthening the region's Catholic schools. Although many national and international organizations are dedicated to improving Catholic schools, there does not appear to be one that collectively leverages the strengths, knowledge, expertise, and vision of multiple institutions of higher education. In this regard, the GMCEC is unique. This collaboration among the five higher education institutions, the Archdiocese, Catholic schools, and the extended Church community will sustain and grow Catholic education into the future.

From consultation and facilitation to communication and technology training, data support, and resource acquisition, the GMCEC leverages the competencies of partner institutions to enhance academic excellence, faith formation, and organizational effectiveness in P-12 Catholic schools. Having already served 600 teachers and administrators from 80 archdiocesan schools, the GMCEC plans to continue providing the same high-quality support through its future educational and service programs, including:

- providing integrated and comprehensive training to meet the needs of students with learning differences;
- supporting teachers and leaders in effectively and justly serving second language learners;
- conducting workshops and consultation in grant writing, enrollment management, and governance; and
- providing staff training to enhance classroom practice by integrating technology in order to increase student learning and engagement.

Support has also included the use of GMCEC member institutions' undergraduate and graduate populations by placing them in schools with needs in the area of data analysis, health and wellness program development, mental health counseling, and various marketing and communications initiatives such as brochure and website development. Furthermore, upon the request of the Archdiocese's Office for Schools, the GMCEC has embarked on an assessment of high school culture. The primary goals of this effort are



to evaluate and bolster schools in three primary areas: (a) theology and faith formation, (b) academics, and (c) school culture. Surveys and focus groups are being used to evaluate both school and student dispositions in the context of faith and their effects on student knowledge and behaviors as well as to take a deeper and more meaningful look at student academic performance in Catholic schools.

Through the GMCEC, the Milwaukee region is embracing the true strength and promise of Catholic education, pushing schools toward higher levels of excellence and inclusiveness that will help ensure sustainability. The GMCEC not only possesses the expertise and momentum to continue making a difference for children and families in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, but also holds a blueprint to help other archdioceses and their Catholic institutions of higher education impact the education of Catholic school children throughout the nation.

*William Henk is dean of the College of Education and professor of literacy at Marquette University. Beyond co-ounding the Greater Milwaukee Catholic Education Consortium, he has led his college's efforts in national and state accreditation, established a Teach For America program, launched and anchored the popular Marquette Educator blog, contributed significantly to the Milwaukee Succeeds community partnership, and is codirecting a feasibility study for a Cristo Rey High School in Milwaukee. Correspondence about this essay can be sent to Dr. Henk at [William.henk@marquette.edu](mailto:William.henk@marquette.edu)*

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