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# How Do Private Sector Schools Serve the Public Good by Fostering Inclusive Service Delivery Models?

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## Abstract

Conversations about promoting educational reforms that redress educational inequities often ignore private schools as irrelevant. Yet pursuits of inclusivity in private sector schools serve the public interest. This article focuses on how the system of Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of St. Louis has been purposefully striving for 2 decades to build the capacity of its schools to meet students' special needs. We focus on 3 leadership skills that are central to this effort: boundary spanning, social innovation, and mission-focus. Our premise in focusing on these skills is that educators in both public and private educational sectors serve the public good when they promote inclusive PK–12 schooling, and accordingly, leaders across these sectors can more effectively move in

this direction by supporting one another and sharing lessons learned. Hence, although we draw from parochial contexts, we focus on implications for inclusive schooling and leadership across school sectors.

SCHOOL LEADERS STRIVING to cultivate inclusive schools find themselves wrestling with multiple dimensions of diversity and marginalization that intersect in complex manners ([26]). The purview of these complexities extends across public and private educational sectors, but the contexts of these sectors differ in important ways. For instance, private schools tend to be more exclusionary than schools in the public sector ([4]). Underdeveloped service delivery models, reliance on tuition, and other organizational limitations contribute to private schools enrolling proportionately fewer traditionally marginalized students than their public school counterparts ([22]). Because of these differences, conversations about promoting educational reforms that redress educational inequities often ignore private schools as irrelevant. Yet, important countertrends demonstrate how pursuits of inclusivity in private sector schools serve the public interest.

This article focuses on one such countertrend: the system of Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of St. Louis. For 20 years, this system has been purposefully striving to build the capacity of its school communities to meet students' special needs, a term we use here to include both diagnosed disabilities and other barriers to student success. A more comprehensive presentation of this systemic reform is presented elsewhere ([24]). Here we focus more narrowly on three leadership skills that are proving to promote inclusive service delivery in the Catholic schools of St. Louis: boundary spanning, social innovation, and mission focus. We argue that the leaders in these schools developed these skills through courage, initiative, and inventiveness, and thus assert that this moxy played a key role in allowing them to foster inclusive service delivery models. These skills in boundary spanning, social innovation, and mission focus apply across public and private educational sectors. Hence, although we draw from a parochial context, we write for colleagues across school sectors that are collectively serving the public good in their efforts to promote inclusive schooling.

## Context of the Archdiocese of St. Louis

The broader context of Catholic schooling in the United States provides a helpful backdrop for understanding the context of the Archdiocese of St. Louis. Nationally, the population of school-age children has grown over the past 3 decades and is projected to continue to rise through 2020. This population continues to grow increasingly diverse across multiple dimensions ([15]). Although most students attend public schools, more than one in ten students is enrolled in private schools, with the vast majority of these (80%) attending schools with some religious affiliation ([17]). Catholic schools serve the largest group of these students (43%) ([17]). Evidence suggests that Catholic schools are more pluralistic in terms of socioeconomic status than other private schools, as they have lower per-pupil tuition (\$6018) than their other religious (\$7117) or nonsectarian (\$17,316) counterparts ([15]). In addition, over a quarter (29%) of the enrollment in Catholic schools are students of color ([17]).

Catholic schooling has a longstanding record of promoting strong educational outcomes for traditionally marginalized students, grounded in their foundational philosophy of education ([29]). For instance, evidence suggests these schools often do relatively well serving students living in poverty and students of color (e.g., [11]; [21]). Yet the schools that are most likely to serve such students are also the most likely to be closed ([10]; [18]). Declining enrollment in Catholic schools is well documented ([15]). Urban elementary schools account for much of this decline over the last 2 decades ([18]). Moreover, urban charter schools have been shown to contribute to declines in enrollment levels of neighboring Catholic schools ([30]).

Across other dimensions of diversity, Catholic schooling has also been uneven. For instance, despite a longstanding history of educating immigrant communities, Catholic schools in recent decades have tended to underserve linguistically diverse students ([28]). And most relevant to this article, Catholic schools have largely

failed to create structures that allow them to implement their espoused value of welcoming all students, including those with special needs and/or diagnosed disabilities ([23], [24], [25]).

Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of St. Louis have mirrored demographic changes prevalent throughout much of the United States. For instance, in 1980, 68,000 students were enrolled pre-K to 12, and in 2012, 43,000 students were enrolled. Approximately 13% of students in these Catholic schools identify as racial and ethnic minorities, compared to 16% of the statewide population. In terms of serving students with diagnosed disabilities or other special needs, however, Catholic schools in this region are strikingly proportionate: for the past 2 decades, on average, such students compose 12% of the student body, comparable to the proportion in public schools in Missouri of 13% (Catholic Education Center Data, Archdiocese of St. Louis; Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Data). This phenomenon of a system of private schools improving the inclusion of students with special needs warrants attention.

## Overview of the Learning Consultant Model

In the early 1990s, a growing body of research in the area of educating students with special needs focused on the use of the *consultancy approach*, in contrast to the *resource approach*, to meet students' special learning needs. Initially, two administrators at the archdiocesan central office began studying this research with the goal of building the capacity of schools in the archdiocese to more effectively serve a wider range of students. They took an expansive approach to defining special needs, encompassing not only diagnosed disabilities identified under IDEA, but also other diagnosed mental, cognitive, and physical special needs. Based on their study, these leaders decided to pilot the Learning Consultant Model (LCM).

They found several components to the LCM persuasive. In this model, an educator with special education training and strong communication skills works primarily with the general education classroom teachers, rather than providing direct instruction to students with special needs. The model builds the capacity of general education teachers to understand the specific special needs of the specific students in their classrooms and to know how to implement the accommodations and modifications the students need to experience school success in the general curriculum ([5]; [6]; [7]; [9]; [13], [14]; [31]). Research continues to show that students who remain in the classroom, with appropriate supports provided for both these students and their teachers, perform better than those who are regularly pulled out for special classes or services. Because student learning is the ultimate goal of every school, this was an important finding.

Over time, the archdiocese established a leadership team as more principals became interested in LCM. One lesson from the literature that surprised this team was that dispositions play a key role in meeting students' special needs. The most important factor for success in this is teacher attitude, and the least important is the severity of the students' disability or exceptionality. Likewise, the factor identified to constitute the most substantial hindrance is teacher attitude, followed by time for meeting ([20]). Thus, building the capacity of the school to meet students' special needs hinges on supporting teacher dispositions. The LCM directly addresses this by providing structures that support teacher learning, explicitly addressing this factor.

A related factor that also affected the leadership team's decision to pilot the LCM was faculty collaboration. The team learned that pull-out programs impede faculty collaboration. When such programs are used to address students' special learning needs, there is often a tendency for classroom teachers to see special needs students no longer as their students, but rather the students of the expert. By contrast, the LCM enables school personnel to meet diverse student needs through shared expertise and mutual ownership of defining problems and solutions.

Finally, the leadership team was persuaded that the LCM would help schools cultivate a climate conducive to inclusion. The team was convinced by the research that pull-out programs tend to reinforce fragmentation

rather than community; educationally, learning apart from, rather than with, classmates likewise becomes the norm. The LCM fosters professional collaboration and educational community by providing classroom teachers with the information and supports needed to effectively teach students with special learning needs in the regular classroom. In addition, this model results in decreased labeling and stigmatizing of students with special learning needs.

## Implementing the LCM

The Archdiocese of St. Louis began implementing the LCM in the early 1990s. Funding from a start-up grant from a local charitable foundation that focuses on support for persons with disabilities supported a pilot year. The first learning consultant in the archdiocese split her time between two high schools. Administrators of those two schools knew that the grant would cover salary and benefits for one year only, and that at the end of this pilot year, the schools would need to decide if the benefits of having a learning consultant were significant enough to fund the position themselves going forward. Today, in 2012, both schools have a full-time learning consultant, and this original learning consultant is now the academic principal at one of the two schools at which she first served.

Over the past 2 decades, momentum for LCM has developed. Although it has not yet become universal, over the past 2 decades the popularity of the model has grown steadily. Currently, approximately 65% of schools in the Archdiocese of St. Louis implement it. The LCM is most frequently found in elementary and secondary schools that have a special needs population of at least 5% of students and that have an enrollment of 200 or more students. Approximately two in three elementary schools and three in four secondary schools have a learning consultant, and some have more than one. The majority of schools who have not implemented LCM are either small rural elementary schools (<100 students) or secondary schools with highly selective admissions criteria.

## Building Capacity to Meet Students' Special Needs

As the LCM spread, the schools have grown more capable at meeting students' special needs. Before implementing this model, most Catholic schools in the archdiocese served few, if any, students with special needs. Now students with diagnosed disabilities or other special needs represent 12% of the student body across the system, the majority of whom have mild to moderate diagnosed disabilities.

Although the capacity of the system as a whole has grown, implementation of the LCM across schools remains uneven. The proportion of students with special needs attending various schools ranges widely, from schools serving almost no such students (e.g., one elementary school identifies only 3% of students as having special needs) to schools with disproportionately high numbers (e.g., in one high school, over 30% of students have diagnosed special needs, as do nearly 25% in an elementary school). In addition, the fidelity of implementation of the LCM is variable. In some schools, the learning consultant spends virtually all her time in consultative work; in other schools, two-thirds (67%) of the time is spent functioning as a resource room special educator. Thus, although all schools implementing this reform are at least doing a better job enrolling students with recognized special needs and attempting to serve them, the degree to which this is done inclusively varies.

Having described the origins and development of the LCM in these schools, we now turn to discuss three specific components of leadership that promote this reform. We highlight three: boundary spanning, social innovation, and mission focus.

## Boundary Spanning

As the LCM increased in familiarity and in implementation during the 1990s and 2000s, collaboration increased not only within schools, but also among Catholic schools and between Catholic schools and external community agencies. Boundary-spanning skills allow people to successfully navigate into unfamiliar territory, building

relationships among people divided by any number of different barriers based on perceived differences ([1]). Homophily—the tendency to interact with others who one perceives to be similar to oneself in any number of dimensions, from race and ethnicity to professional position to religious orientation—often leads to a phenomena where people operate in silos, interacting primarily with others who are just like them. Boundary spanners, who reach across such silos, were central to the adaptation and spread of this reform.

Key boundary spanners facilitating collaboration within the LCM were learning consultants. Although technically faculty members, learning consultants found themselves in a new role that placed them somewhere between teachers and administrator. Their skills and expertise at working with students make them valuable teaching peers to develop plans for accommodating students' special needs, but their role in providing feedback and advice to teachers is more administrative. Occupying this middle ground, learning consultants frequently bridge connections among teachers as well as between teachers and administrators.

Learning consultants serve as boundary spanners beyond their schools, as well. The Archdiocese of St. Louis consists of 11 counties across 6,000 square miles in Eastern Missouri. In a number of areas, groups of learning consultants meet regionally to share resources and brainstorm solutions to challenging and complex student needs. Archdiocesanwide learning consultant meetings were held quarterly for a 2-year period in the 2000s to enable learning consultants to learn the Response to Intervention process.

This boundary spanning does not stop at the Catholic sector, but extends to public school colleagues. As the number of special needs personnel in Catholic schools increased, so did collaboration with the public school districts that provide diagnostic evaluations and limited special education services to eligible parentally-placed nonpublic school students under the provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The Special School District of St. Louis County, an *overlay* school district that provides special education to 22 public school districts, recognized the Catholic Education Office of the Archdiocese of St. Louis with one of its Special Ambassador awards for the extraordinary commitment to partnership.

An implication for school leaders from these examples of boundary spanning is providing both formal and informal scaffolds to collaboration. Within schools, formal scaffolds to boundary spanning include established protocols for learning consultants to meet with teachers and to communicate accommodations among various parties (teachers, students, learning consultant, and parents). Most schools have developed *learning profiles* for their students with diagnosed special needs. These at-a-glance summaries facilitate sharing among teachers. Formal scaffolds that promote boundary spanning across schools include regular meetings that the associate superintendent convenes that provide opportunities for learning about low-incidence diagnoses, rapidly proliferating diagnoses (e.g., autism spectrum disorders), and new processes (e.g., response to intervention); for sharing successes, challenges, and resources; and for dissecting particularly difficult cases and identifying promising strategies to address them. These provide occasions to also build bridges with public school personnel. In some areas of the archdiocese, learning consultants also participate in regional peer-led meetings. Informally, the boundary spanning takes place in the form of networking (internal to schools, amongst Catholic schools, and across sectors) facilitated by the learning consultant. School leaders across sectors promote inclusion by scaffolding collaborative practices in both formal and informal manners.

## Social Innovation

A second lesson learned from the implementation of the LCM is the importance of school leaders—particularly principals—engaging in social innovations. Social innovations are social: They benefit the common good, not just private interests. They are innovations in that they provide new solutions to social problems that are better than their predecessors (e.g., more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just; [19]). The LCM, itself, is an example of a social innovation to the extent that it creates stronger ways for schools to meet students' special needs.

Different examples of social innovation can also be seen in how these Catholic schools have resourced LCM implementation. For instance, the original piloting of this model involved garnering new resources from an outside granting agency. Schools with the most robust, vibrant models have continued to attract financial resources to enact the model. For instance, one school has creatively used Title III funds to fund coaching for their teachers and learning consultant to develop new strategies for lesson planning and providing feedback to students. Some schools have targeted grants to provide seed money to begin a learning consultant position. Many schools have found a positive cycle, where the increased capacity of the school to meet students' special needs has allowed them to increase their enrollment, which has allowed them to generate the necessary funds to support the salary of the learning consultant. Although schools across all sectors are resource-constrained, those in the Catholic sector have frequently attributed an incapacity to meet students' special needs to these constraints. Thus, innovative efforts to resource the LCM are particularly important.

In addition to resourcing the LCM, social innovation is apparent in the implementation of the model within schools. For instance, a typical pattern in a school is for a teacher to initially approach her learning consultant to discuss a student who is struggling, and then for the teacher and learning consultant to collaboratively strategize how to address this struggle to help the student experience success. Frequently this involves the learning consultant serving as a broker of information, communicating with different teachers to determine whether the struggle is persistent across contexts or limited in scope, and drawing upon outside resources to gather additional information about the particular issue. This reflects not only boundary spanning (as described previously), but also social innovation. They are social, in that the resulting strategies that the learning consultant and teacher employ to address the struggle the student is experiencing benefit not only the individual student, but frequently other students as well. They are innovations, because they signify improvements over the current practices. On occasion, official documentation has captured these innovations ([2], [3]).

A key implication of this for school leaders across sectors is the importance of promoting social innovation within a school. Practically speaking, one way to do this is deprivatizing practices. The LCM encourages innovative, effective pedagogical practices to be shared, adopted, and adapted throughout the building. Another (counterintuitive) implication of this for school leaders is to attend to the positive cycles that social innovations can spur—such as the increased capacity to provide inclusive service delivery yielding increased access to resources.

## Mission Focus

A third lesson learned from the implementation of the LCM is the role of mission-focus narratives in transforming schools to better meet students' special needs. By this, we mean that the justification for the reform was couched in a narrative about the fundamental identity and purpose of the school. From the outset, the framing of this reform was grounded in the Catholic philosophy of education. Documentation that the archdiocese published to provide guidance to schools makes this connection explicit. By way of example, an excerpt from the opening pages of the guidebook for implementation, under the heading "The Call to 'Teach All Students'," reads in part:

The root meaning of the word "catholic" is "universal." Thus, just as Jesus called His Church to "teach all nations," Catholic schools are called to "teach all students," thereby making religious education and education for life in human society available to as many students as possible regardless of socio-economic level or proficiency in learning. ([3], p. 1)

Such language is typical of the official archdiocesan publications describing the LCM. Similarly, when schools reference and describe their site-specific implementation of the LCM, they often refer to this as part of their Catholic Identity.

A mission-focus narrative provides a key rationale for framing the efforts to meet students' special needs in the Catholic schools that is distinct from the public school counterparts, which are bound much more fully by a legal obligation. Even though Catholic schools are subject to legal obligations in this regard, their moral duties are arguably even more compelling ([23], [25]).

An implication of this is that school leaders across sectors should emphasize the moral dimensions that undergird the changes in practices that they are advocating. Specifically, a school's mission can catalyze enthusiasm toward meeting students' special needs inclusively. Toward this end, the mission statements (and other related documents, such as espoused philosophies) of Catholic schools often emphasize both the individual dignity of each child and the common good. Although slogans to this effect might give lip service to such commitments in many schools (e.g., "All students can learn!"), Catholic schools tend to be much more systematic and deliberate in weaving these commitments into the fabric of the school culture. For instance, rituals tend to play an important role in Catholic schools, including daily prayer and regular religious ceremonies. These occasions allow the focus of the mission to infuse the culture of the school, as the way we do things around here. To the degree that these rituals affirm both individual dignity and the common good, they promote this mission focus. School leaders of secular institutions can learn from these examples and adopt other ways to imbue the school culture with the moral commitments toward inclusion.

## Conclusions

We have described one example of private sector schools, Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of St. Louis, pursuing inclusivity. The implementation of the LCM here has served the public good by expanding the capacity of these schools to serve a broader spectrum of students. Three specific components for leadership that seem central to these efforts are boundary spanning, social innovation, and mission focus. We have focused narrowly on how these components are manifest in implementing the specific reform of the LCM, which is focused on meeting students' special needs. Schools across sectors—ranging from public to private, from secular to religious, and from rural to urban—may benefit from focusing on these components in their efforts to expand inclusive schooling and leadership for social justice.

The three components we have identified are expansive in application, providing concrete strategies that are adaptable across both context and dimensions of diversity. First, recognizing the practical importance of promoting a culture of respect within a pluralistic community, school leaders can promote boundary spanning as a practical way to foster relational trust and heterophily. School leaders can draw on both individuals and processes to promote boundary spanning in multiple directions, ranging from race and ethnicity, to language, to the multiple other social identities at play in schools.

Second, recognizing the persistent and ubiquitous inequities that plague many schools and the broader communities in which they are situated, astute school leaders relentlessly seek social innovations. Many social innovations will address specific dimensions of diversity. In addition to the LCM discussed, another example of this is the two-way immersion (TWI) approach to bilingual education ([12]). Many programmatic approaches to serving students with limited proficiency in English view non-English native languages as a deficit to be remedied and, consequently, segregate these students for this remediation. By contrast, the TWI model builds on language as an asset and clusters native English-speaking students with students who are native in another language. Together, they pursue bilingualism and biliteracy. As such, TWI illustrates a new solution to a problem—here, the problem being how to effectively educate students from diverse linguistic backgrounds in



inclusive environments—and does so in a manner that benefits the common good. The lens of social innovation provides a framework for school leaders to think in novel manners about old problems.

Third, the value of mission focus in combatting cynicism and catalyzing collective efficacy can hardly be overstated. In an age where the discourses around school leadership often resort to stories of heroic individuals (e.g., *Waiting for Superman*; [8]), school leaders must situate their efforts to promote inclusive schooling in mission-focusing narratives that engage the whole community: from teachers and students to students and families to community members, business, and civic leaders. Such narratives can be grounded not only in the missions of specific schools or districts, but may reflect broader school-community initiatives (e.g., [27]).

In conclusion, the social justice goals in schools of expanding educational opportunities and inclusive practices are ambitious, but need not be ambiguous. Three ways that school leaders in St. Louis have pursued these goals are by cultivating boundary spanning, seeking social innovation, and crafting mission-focused narratives. These provide further support for the maxim: achieving social justice goals requires moxy, not miracles.

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