

Bishop Baraga Catholic School
Strategic Planning Committee
School Organization Research Summary
December 15, 2010

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three months, the Strategic Planning Committee has been conducting research into the current organization of the school. The following document outlines the results of this effort. The Strategic Planning Committee used this information as the basis for creating our recommendations.

RESEARCH METHODS

In order to get a complete picture of how the school organization currently operates, we interviewed the following individuals and groups:

- Father Paul Megge, Pastor
- Kitty LaBlance, Principal
- Charles Taylor, Superintendent
- School and Parish Committees, including:
Parish Finance Council, School Advisory Board, Home and School Committee, SCRIP Committee, Marketing Committee and the Baraga Boosters.

We also used several documents to help inform our efforts, including:

- Diocese of Gaylord Catholic School Policy Handbook
- Diocese of Gaylord Parish Finance Policies
- MANS Accreditation – School Improvement Plan

RESEARCH RESULTS

School Committee Composition

We have approximately 40 participants across our 6 school boards. 70% of these volunteers are parents, 20% are staff or faculty and 10% are parishioners. Several parents and staff members serve on multiple committees. The committees serve the following functions:

Baraga Boosters: This group is entirely focused on raising funds to help offset the school's operating costs. The Booster's Fall Gala is the single largest fundraising effort the school undertakes.

Marketing: The primary role of the Marketing Committee is to promote a positive image of the school in an informative fashion throughout the community. The goal of the Marketing group is to help sustain and ultimately increase the school's enrollment.

Advisory: This group serves as the primary advisory body for the school. They provide advice to Kitty on questions of school policy and identify other potential avenues of research or inquiry when dealing with a difficult school issue.

Home and School: Ideally, this group would serve as the primary link between the school and its parents. While they do provide some programs (such as the Mentor Program) that serve this role, a large portion of their efforts go toward raising money to provide the “extras” for the school that our budget does not cover. These include items such as supporting the Library, Catholic Schools Week and Battle of the Books. They also provide funds to each teacher which they can use for supplies, field trips or other classroom expenses.

SCRIP: The SCRIP Committee is responsible for administering our school's SCRIP Program. This program uses the sale of gift cards to raise money for tuition assistance and also to help reduce the tuition payments of participating families.

Education Foundation: The Education Foundation is a Michigan nonprofit (501c3) organization whose purpose is to raise monies to benefit Bishop Baraga students through donations to the school's scholarship fund. The funds donated to the scholarship fund are from interest accrued on the endowment's principle.

School Committee Strengths

Groups generally feel they are organized and hard working. Participants enjoy the people they are working with and feel they are providing a worthwhile service to the school.

School Committee Areas for Improvement

When asked what opportunities for improvement existed, most committee's responses focused on two areas: lack of volunteers and a need for more communication.

Almost every group interviewed mentioned the need for more members or an increase in volunteer help at their various activities. Each group feels stretched quite thin and many current members seem to be suffering from “burnout” due to this lack of resources.

Several groups also mentioned difficulties related to communication. While the specific problems were varied, most comments could be broken down into 3 general categories:

- *Lack of communication across school groups:*
Currently, there is no mechanism in place that allows for communication across the different school boards and committees. On several instances, we heard questions such as “What does the X committee do anyway?” Because individual groups do not communicate with each other, there is little opportunity for sharing of ideas or resources.
- *Lack of communication between the school and parish leadership:*
Because the parish leadership plays such a key role in the administration of the school, some groups indicated that they would like to have a more open line of communication with them. For example, if the Advisory Board had a more regular interaction with the Finance Council and with Father Paul, they could feel confident that the policies and priorities they were recommending would have the full support of the parish.
- *Lack of general knowledge about how the school is financed:*
While we did not specifically inquire about school finances, it became clear in our conversations with the committees (and also with school parents), that most people have no idea

how the school is financed. This is particularly evident when talking with groups that do fundraising. Most did not have a clear picture of how the money they help raise is distributed across the Parish. This lack of understanding has led to frustration, and in some cases distrust. It is also evident that school parents do not understand how the true cost of their child's education is actually funded. Many did not realize that the parish contributes up to 40% of the real cost of educating each student, as mandated by the Diocese.

School Committee Opinions on Improving Communication

One idea that was presented to each committee was the possibility of having a steering committee serve as the “umbrella” over each existing school group to help increase communication and ensure there is no redundancy of effort. This board would be made up of one representative from each existing school committee.

In general, all the committees were in agreement that they could benefit from an increase in communication between school groups. Because it functions as the school's governing body, the Advisory Board felt that they should be the group to serve as this “umbrella”. The other school committees were also generally supportive of the idea of this “umbrella”, but several expressed concerns over the idea that a member of their committee would have to attend yet another monthly meeting when they were already stretched so thin.

Other suggestions for improving communication were also given, including:

- Periodically holding a “committee-wide” meeting. This would allow the members of all the school committees to meet together and share updates on their activities and progress.
- Modifying our meeting schedules so that all groups meet on the same night. This suggestion was given by a former Baraga student whose children attend Catholic school in the Grand Rapids area. Her school made this change and has seen improvements in communication between committees. They begin the evening with all individuals in the same room for socializing, prayer, summary reports and a brief discussion. After this first half hour, the individual groups break out and meet in their regular sessions.
- Make meeting minutes available to all the other groups. This would allow interested people to stay informed about what other committees are doing.

School Committee Opinions on Fundraising Model

Committees were also asked to give their opinions about the structure of our fundraising efforts. Currently, our fundraising efforts are undertaken by multiple committees. During our interviews, each group was asked whether they liked this model, or if they would rather see these efforts consolidated under one central fundraising committee?

This question was perhaps the most controversial. There was no real consensus among the groups as to the best way to handle this issue. Some groups (especially the ones who do not directly raise funds) thought a consolidation of efforts was a good idea. They felt it would create a more coordinated fundraising plan and take some of the pressure off the individual committees. Other groups, particularly those who are responsible for holding fundraising activities, were hesitant to give up “control” of where these funds are spent. Each group feels that their contributions are funding important items, and are concerned these might not continue to be funded if efforts are consolidated under one group.

Feedback from Diocesan Schools

As part of our research, we also contacted several other Catholic schools both within and outside of the Diocese. Our assumption was that the issues we are dealing with are not unique, but are probably being considered and addressed by other schools. We contacted these schools in an attempt to gather opinions and information about what has worked well and perhaps what lessons they may have learned when dealing with similar topics.

Of the 13 Diocesan schools we contacted, eight schools responded to our requests for information. While some of the responses were quite short and did not necessarily offer any new information, others were quite a bit more helpful, speaking with us over the phone and sending relevant documents. The Grand Traverse Area Catholic Schools invited us to visit their facilities, review their Strategic Plan and meet with their principals and business manager. We are currently working with them to gather more information and set up a meeting.

In reviewing the information we were able to collect, it appears that many other schools within the Diocese are struggling with some of the same issues we are. The schools we heard from spoke of declining enrollment, marketing difficulties and attempts to improve their volunteer efforts. Another comment that we heard from more than one school was that people do not necessarily understand the advantages of a Catholic education. As one respondent noted, “We simply need to educate the public (Catholics and non-Catholics alike) about the merits of a Catholic school education. I am convinced that they would realize that we offer a different product and it’s one that is worth paying for.”

NEXT STEPS

As we move forward, the Strategic Planning Committee will be using the results of our research to create a series of recommendations that relate to, and build on, the Strategic Plan Strategies and Tactics that were drafted this past summer. These recommendations will be presented to key stakeholders within the school and parish leadership for their feedback and approval.