

# Vision for School Improvement

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Any vision for school improvement must begin and end with the student. Once the end-goal for the student is articulated, everything else in the vision falls in place to support that. Teaching styles, pedagogies, and practices are only relevant as they pertain to helping the student achieve and become their very best. Therefore, the first part of my vision for a school is a profile of an exiting student at St. Joseph School; the second is what I believe a school can do to produce such a student.

## **Profile of an Exiting Student at St. Joseph School:**

An exemplary exiting student at St. Joseph School should be a critically-thinking, high-achieving, compassionate lover and servant of God. This is the kind of person who, as St. Catherine of Sienna said, would “set the world on fire.” Children should leave St. Joseph School prepared to thrive wherever their educational path takes them next, which is why these three traits are so indispensable. Critical thinking must be cultivated so that students are prepared in high school and beyond to discern truth among the jungle of “information” they will encounter, understand that truth, and apply it in the decisions they make. It is not enough merely to be knowledgeable; students must be able to critically analyze information and have the “soft skills” of interpersonal communication, collaboration, and problem-solving. Also important, students should have a constant aim to achieve greatly, be it in academics, athletics, the arts, or simply living a saintly life. Finally, and most importantly, St. Joseph School should aim to produce compassionate lovers and servants of God. If we are not helping students follow Christ more closely, everything else is for naught.

While this general three-fold description should apply to all students, the reality is that each child carries with himself or herself a unique place in this world, and anyone who tries to play someone else’s part is getting it wrong. Matthew Kelly calls it “becoming the best version of ourselves.” As Bl. Cardinal John Henry Newman said,

“I am created to do something or be something for which no one else is created; I have a place in God's counsels, in God's world, which no one else has; whether I be rich or poor, despised or esteemed by man, God knows me and calls me by my name.”

The challenge is for a school both to impart these universal traits to all students and also to help students find their unique way of living these out. Only through a personal relationship with Christ can a student truly find their distinctive path in life, which is why prayer, the sacraments, and service are so vitally important to their Catholic education. Students must know God experientially, not just theologically.

## **What a School Can Do to Produce Such a Student:**

In order for a school to produce this kind of exiting student, it must intentionally foster these traits in its educational culture. This happens first through modeling. Teachers must model critical thinking and provide authentic classroom tasks to give students opportunities to hone this skill. They must model hard work and high expectations for themselves through professional development and common teamwork; teachers should always seek to improve their classroom craft in an effort to give their students the best education possible. Finally and above all, they must model a deep love and commitment to Christ. As the saying goes, faith is “caught, not taught,” and, “you cannot give what

you do not possess.” Teachers must be evangelizers to their students, constantly introducing them to Christ through their example and teaching.

The principal’s role is to hold all stakeholders, including himself or herself, accountable to this task. This means helping teachers grow in their craft, helping create an entire school of master teachers who seek to continually improve. It also means cultivating a team mentality with students’ best interests at the center of the school’s focus and making changes when necessary to ensure a guaranteed and viable curriculum, effective teacher supervision practices, and best teaching practices. Finally, it means leading through an example of integrity, compassion, and thirst for excellence.

### **Conclusion:**

No matter where a particular school is or how it’s doing, this is a viable vision for school improvement. A school can always seek to be better in these areas, and if it does so, students benefit academically, personally, and spiritually. The reality is, in an American culture more hostile to the Christian worldview than ever in its history, there are many forces vying for students’ hearts, souls, minds, and strength. Only if we seek to build these traits into students will they not become some of the many young people who leave the faith in or after high school. Rather, our end-goal should be to cultivate joy-filled, faithful Catholics able to critically analyze the world around them, thrive in high school and beyond, and make a positive impact for Christ and his Church.

# Instructional Leadership Framework

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Since teaching and learning is the primary purpose of any school, instructional leadership is the most important role for a school principal. It is the principal's role to help teachers continually improve their craft in the classroom, and this includes open and honest ongoing dialogue about what quality instruction is comprised of, accurate and meaningful feedback based on earnest classroom observation, and the provision of resources needed to help teachers set and meet goals for improvement.

I've been fortunate enough to experience both sides of classroom observations and evaluations, and I recognize both the benefits and pitfalls of this procedure. As a teacher, I know the all-too-common practice of high-stakes formal evaluations, which oftentimes are the one or two times in a year the principal ever earnestly observes my instruction. This creates both anxiety for the teacher, who has "one shot" to look great, and an incomplete picture of that classroom for the principal, as no single lesson, no matter how excellent or poor, can possibly give a complete representation of a teacher's performance. This is why I have found that frequent classroom exposure on the part of the observer, including brief walk-throughs, informal sit-ins, and formal whole-lesson observations are most beneficial for both teacher and principal; the teacher's anxiety diminishes as the principal's presence is not a strange interruption to "normal" operations, and the principal's ability to provide accurate and meaningful feedback and guidance is much more authentic.

In my experience observing classrooms and evaluating lessons as part of Oakland Schools' Aspiring Principals Leadership Academy and as a teacher leader in Oxford's RAWC program, I've learned the importance of using classroom observations not as the be-all, end-all of a teacher's evaluation, but rather as centerpiece for conversation with the teacher within a larger context. When the teacher has ownership and agency in his or her goals for the lesson and has had an ongoing conversation with the observer, true coaching can occur, which is the primary goal of teacher supervision. However, classroom observations as conversation centerpieces are only meaningful within a context of individualized goal-setting, ongoing conversation with one's peers and supervisor, and shared beliefs about teaching and learning.

Meaningful professional development must be at the forefront of any school's culture. As important as the teacher appraisal process is, it has a hard ceiling if the school isn't moving in an intentional direction. Research shows that the most effective professional development, when it comes to meaningful improvement in teaching and learning, occurs over the long-term, in contrast to "sit-and-git" or "spray-and-pray" models. Further, when the whole staff is working toward a similar instructional goal, real conversations among the staff about teaching and learning become rich and powerful. Therefore, while there is an important place for individualized professional development, a strong component of it should be schoolwide.

The most essential element to ensure proper instructional leadership is an atmosphere of trust, safety, and professionalism. The school's overarching goal should be to improve classroom instruction over several years, with all stakeholders employing a shared vision of how to improve. The principal's job is to help lead individual teachers and the school as a whole toward continual growth in high-quality teaching and learning.

# Managerial Leadership Framework

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While teaching and learning is the main focus for any school, none of it matters if the building's day to day operations do not run smoothly. The teacher's focus should be 100% on delivering high-quality instruction and little else. Therefore, one of the most important jobs of the principal is to put structures in place to allow the teacher the maximum amount of uninterrupted teaching time and meaningful non-teaching time, including meetings, prep time, and professional development. In this sense, the principal should be like an offensive lineman in football – you only notice them when something goes wrong (unfortunately!)

The first and foremost concern in terms of managerial leadership is the safety of the school. The principal needs to ensure that students and teachers feel safe and actually are safe, so that teaching and learning can happen at its optimal level. During my time as Dean of Students at Oxford High School, this was one of my primary duties. I personally made sure doors were locked on time, that any suspicious activity was reported and dealt with, and that any student conflicts were effectively addressed. I also learned the logistical considerations that go into things like properly organized emergency drills, lunchroom oversight, and crisis management. Safety is the first priority of an effective managerial school leader, and as principal I would ensure that the structures in place to guard the safety of staff and students are current and effective.

Logistical considerations are also paramount. At Oxford Middle School, I served on the Bell Schedule Committee, where I learned even something as seemingly simple as a bell schedule is incredibly complex and requires considerable forethought and input from diverse voices. I learned the gravity of managing an organization's budget both as Bravehearts Treasurer and as St. Joseph's Adult Faith Formation and Evangelization Coordinator. My time as varsity head coach for Oxford High School's lacrosse team forced me to learn the importance of logistical organization. I was responsible for everything from practice schedules to uniform orders to game and bus scheduling to actually making sure the nets were tied to the goalposts. As principal, I would consider it my duty to make sure all logistical bases are covered, including efficient staff meetings and professional development. Meetings should be run with a purpose or else not run at all. While not all logistics are personally carried out by the principal, as principal I would ensure that they were taken care of in order to ensure the teacher's time and energy is spent teaching.

Perhaps the most underestimated aspect of managerial leadership is effective communication. I've learned to be an excellent communicator as a teacher, varsity head coach, and Alpha session leader at St. Joseph Church. I understand communication must be tailored to one's audience and purpose. Communication must be measured, accurate, and charitable. As principal I would make extra effort to make sure parents, students, teachers, and the community received ample, timely, and appropriate communication.

# Collaborative Leadership Framework

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An effective principal must do more than work with theories and ideas—he or she must be able to work with people. Collaboration is the grease that makes the wheels of the school turn, and without the ability to motivate others, bring people together around a common purpose, empower and involve people in decision making, and effectively work with people to become their best, even the most driven and bright principal is ineffective.

I believe strongly in the servant leadership model, advanced by Dr. Ken Blanchard, which inverts the typical top-down power structure, where the leader gives orders and the underlings must fall in line “or else,” to an upturned structure in which the leader seeks ways to support the people he or she oversees. While modern-day companies like Southwest Airlines and Best Buy have been notable practitioners of this model in recent times, it is the same timeless principle Jesus taught his disciples. He tells us in Mark 10:

“You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

The philosophy behind the servant-leadership model is that at the top of the pyramid is not the “leader” but rather the final recipient of whatever it is the leader is trying to accomplish. In a school’s case, that would be the student receiving his or her education. The primary person working with that student to facilitate his or her education would be the teacher. Therefore, the principal’s role is not to give the teacher orders but rather to empower the teacher to educate the student, by giving whatever support the teacher needs. Teachers need material support, moral support, administrative support, and developmental support. This does not mean that the principal allows everyone to trample all over himself or herself while everyone else runs the building and makes decisions, but rather that his or her first focus as leader is to make sure teachers have what they need to deliver the quality education everyone strives for.

This kind of model creates real trust between teacher and principal. When teachers know they are truly supported, they are more likely to trust the principal. Compliance becomes less a matter of sheer obedience and more a matter of teamwork and fulfilling one’s role on the team. It is the same model I’ve used as the varsity lacrosse head coach at Oxford High School and the RAWC teacher leader at Oxford Middle School. In both cases, those under my authority felt that although I had the final say in ultimate decisions, their voices mattered and they were empowered and involved in the decision-making. This motivated them to be their best, as they didn’t view me as a taskmaster barking orders but rather a part of their team, working alongside them.

If one of our aims is to produce students who are able to collaborate with others and serve one another, this should be modeled by the adults in the school. While it is true the principal makes executive decisions and oftentimes has final say in certain matters, the staff fulfills their duties more effectively when the atmosphere is that of a team.