

Chapter 4

Catholic Teacher Formation in America



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Abstract The lack of best practice standards for Catholic school teacher formation in the United States amplifies the challenge posed by the fact that most Catholic school teachers in the United States are trained in public, secular institutions, and the teachers themselves reflect the contemporary values of a secularized American culture. A large number of prospective and current teachers are therefore unprepared to teach in a school with a Catholic identity and mission. This chapter summarizes the history and current tensions of the Catholic Church in the United States and how these challenges relate to Catholic school teacher formation. The chapter proposes a process to develop Catholic school teacher formation standards based on the development of the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools* (NSBECS).

Keywords Catholic school · Teacher formation · Standards · United States

4.1 Introduction

The challenges of Catholic school teacher preparation and formation in the United States historically and currently reflect tensions for the American Catholic Church. A significant contemporary challenge for Catholic schools in the United States is forming Catholic school teachers in an ecclesial context that is uncertain how to coherently and consistently define what it means to be Catholic and American today. This chapter summarizes the history of Catholic school teacher preparation and formation in the United States and briefly presents current practices to prepare and form Catholic school teachers. It then posits the fundamental challenge to religious faith inherent in a contemporary worldview. This worldview is manifest in the symptoms of Catholic disaffiliation, diminished personal relevance for Catholicism, and polarized responses to these symptoms, which further exacerbate the challenges.

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The chapter concludes by proposing a process to develop best practice standards for Catholic school teacher induction and formation to address this fundamental challenge and its symptoms.

4.2 History of Catholic Identity and Formation in the United States

Despite the U.S. Bishop's decrees in 1852 for every parish to have a school and 1884 for parents to send their children to a Catholic school, Walch (2016) notes the reality of the school was always based on individual parish circumstances including the city, ethnic identity, and finances of the parish. For the parishes that met this mandate, vowed religious and clergy staffed the majority of principal and teaching roles through the middle of the twentieth century (Walch, 2016). Religious faith formation for the faculty of Catholic schools was therefore largely under the aegis of the religious orders sponsoring and teaching in the schools. The paramount concern for these teachers was their pedagogical training (Walch, 2016). Though the idea of "Catholic normal schools" operated by dioceses or centralized institutes floated around for decades, these initiatives for Catholic school-specific preparation never gained financial support to make them viable (Walch, 2016). In 1902, the Catholic University of America (CUA) in Washington D.C. started an "Institute of Pedagogy" for priests and brothers teaching in Catholic schools; a few years later, CUA started a separate program for sister-teachers (Walch, 2016). Nevertheless, Walch explains, drawing heavily on Veverka (1988), that most teaching religious orders operated their own normal schools to train their sister-teachers: By the 1920s, approximately, 17,000 sister-teachers were enrolled in over 90 religious-community-run normal schools. Simultaneously, the "craft" or apprenticeship model where a novice religious was mentored by an experienced member of the order while both mentor and novice teacher taught full time was widely employed (Walch, 2016). Walch (2016) notes this pleased the religious superiors because it kept their novices under their purview and satisfied the bishops because there was little cost to the diocese; however, given the widely varying quality of pedagogical preparation, this arrangement had few supporters among Catholic educators. By the 1930s, the necessity for state certification for teachers became more prevalent, and therefore, vowed religious began to be prepared in Catholic college training programs and very occasionally in secular public institutions (Walch, 2016).

In 1950, 90.1% faculty and administration of Catholic P-12 schools were vowed religious, though by 1960 the percentage was 73.8% due to the dramatic "Baby Boom" enrollment increase that necessitated hiring lay people to staff the schools (Watzke, 2002). The percentage of lay school leaders and teachers has been on a trajectory upwards since the 1960's. During the 2020–2021 school year, Catholic school staffs were 97.7% lay men and women and 2.3% vowed religious or clergy (National Catholic Education Association, 2021).

4.3 Catholic School Teacher Preparation, Induction, and Ongoing Formation in the United States

There are no standards or criteria for the preparation, induction, or ongoing formation of Catholic school teachers in the United States. For publicly funded P-12 schools, i.e., public schools, teacher certification criteria vary based on the state, so teacher preparation programs in each of the 50 states, including those in Catholic institutions, design their programs to at least meet the criteria for their state. Approximately, 170 post-secondary Catholic institutions in the United States offer programs to prepare and certify future P-12 school teachers (Watzke, 2002). Responses to a survey in the early 2000's showed that roughly 30% of the faculty in American Catholic college or university teacher preparation programs had experience in Catholic schools (Watzke, 2002). Over 80% had faculties where fewer than half had any experience in Catholic schools (Watzke, 2002); only, 15% indicated that the foundation of their mission was for Catholic schools. Approximately, 33% of the respondents did not offer any preparation for Catholic P-12 education. A respondent stated: "Catholic school teachers are prepared in the same manner for certification as are public school teachers" (Watzke, 2002, p. 146). Another wrote: "We prepare students to become teachers in all schools, public, and private. We do not offer special programs or courses for teaching in Catholic schools. We do not distinguish between preparing students for Catholic schools and public schools" (Watzke, 2002, p. 146).

Currently, fourteen institutions sponsor teacher preparation programs in the University Consortium for Catholic Education (UCCE) explicitly for Catholic schools. UCCE programs have graduated roughly 8000 teachers since 1994 and currently graduate approximately 400 teachers each year that administrators hope will be a core of future Catholic school leaders, education program directors, and scholars (University Consortium for Catholic Education, 2021). Regrettably, teachers formed in these Catholic school-oriented programs are a small number of the 142,977 full-time Catholic school staff during the 2020–2021 school year (National Catholic Education Association, 2021). Even if there were standards for pre-service teachers preparing for Catholic schools, there is presently minimal commitment—outside of the UCCE programs—to implement such standards in teacher preparation programs. As a partial response to the fact that relatively few applicants for teaching positions in Catholic schools are specifically prepared for the Catholic school identity and mission, multiple Catholic school administrators referenced their preference to hire Catholic high-school graduates rationalizing that these teachers are more likely to understand and embody the identity and charisms needed for Catholic education (K. Wessling, personal communication, June 24, 2021; C. Sepich, personal communication, June 23, 2021; J. Bopp, personal communication, June 23, 2021). (Note: all personal communication referenced in this chapter is with building or diocese-level Catholic school administrators.)

The responsibility to form teachers for Catholic schools falls to dioceses and individual schools and is often combined with new teacher orientation or induction programs after these individuals have been hired and assigned duties. Orientations

and inductions should be different processes with distinct objectives though they are frequently conflated. Orientations introduce new teachers to procedures and information related to school operations from grading policies to parking spots and are usually completed in a day or two. Inductions connect new teachers to the unique identity and mission of their specific school as well as Catholic education as a whole and serve as an early step in the ongoing formation of Catholic school teachers that continues as long as the teacher is in the school.

An anecdotal review of Catholic schools across a number of dioceses indicates that orientation, induction, and ongoing formation for Catholic school teachers varies (M. Green, personal communication, June 23, 2021; J. Schulte, personal communication, June 22, 2021; C. Sepich, personal communication, June 23, 2021). For example, some dioceses provide an orientation for all new Catholic school teachers at a centralized location, while others expect individual schools to orient and induct their new teachers (V. Kauffold, personal communication, June 24, 2021). The content of these orientations generally includes a philosophical introduction to Catholic schools as well as a pragmatic explanation of teaching in general.

New teacher induction programs have been recognized as crucial for new hires in all schools (Hobson et al., 2009), but this is particularly true in Catholic schools given their distinct ecclesial identity and mission (Brock & Chatlain, 2008). Two of the “emerging themes” from Brock and Chatlain are relevant here. First, they found that diocesan induction frameworks “varied widely in structure and comprehensiveness, ranging from minimal to highly-structured programs” (p. 375). Diocesan orientations were usually part of new teacher inductions, but the content and time allotted ranged between a half-day to three days. Second, the “Catholic dimension” of the induction that oriented new teachers to the religious dimension of Catholic schools was of the highest importance (p. 378).

For example, an archdiocese with a significant number of Catholic schools hosts a required initial eight-hour orientation for teachers new to Catholic schools (V. Kauffold, personal communication, June 24, 2021). The published schedule is as follows:

Mass

Social time—getting to know one another, build community

What does it mean to be a Catholic school teacher?

Professional ethics

Diversity and equity awareness

Lunch provided

Best practices, including classroom management, learning objectives, formative assessments, and methodology related to core instructional practices.

Three more sessions hosted by the diocese for 2.5 h each are mandated over the course of the school year, for a total of 15.5 h. It is unclear how much of the remaining 7.5 h will focus on teacher formation related to the identity and mission of Catholic schooling. Beyond these sessions, each individual school is free to implement their own procedures to induct new teachers. Some schools assign a mentor teacher to beginning teachers or teachers new to the building, with expectations and structure

varying by school and in some cases by circumstances within a school (C. Sepich, personal communication, June 23, 2021).

Ongoing veteran teacher formation for this archdiocese consists of 24 h of formational experience within a given school year. In recent years, the model for this formation has been presentations to faculty on theological topics, and the archdiocese has contracted with an outside entity to provide these presentations. This year, schools can choose an alternative process such as inviting a local pastor or deacon to lead presentations or incorporate a different method where faculty independently watch a series of online presentations before gathering in small groups to reflect on the content for their own teaching and lives (V. Kauffold, personal communication, June 24, 2021).

Typically, independent religious order-sponsored schools have latitude to develop their own induction and ongoing formation initiatives and do not participate in diocesan programs. For instance, Jesuit high schools in the USA Upper Midwest Province induct new teachers and staff with a multi-year formation program with assigned readings and discussion seminars every semester, mandatory retreats, meetings with administrators related to their role in the school, and multiple presentations to their cohort and administration related to their role supporting the Jesuit and Catholic identity of the school (J. Schulte, personal communication, June 21, 2021).

4.4 Historical and Current Tensions for Catholicism in the United States

Catholic Americans' view of themselves and the world has changed since John F. Kennedy was elected the United States' first Catholic president in 1960, the Second Vatican Council, and the social revolution of the 1960's (McGreevy, 2003). The challenge of preparing and forming Catholic school teachers is part of the American Catholic Church's larger challenge to respond to these profound changes in contemporary worldview. The abstract macro-problem facing the Church becomes a concrete micro-problem in terms of Catholic school teacher formation. This is similar to the challenges prior to the 1960's because they reflect and distill tensions in American culture and the American Catholic Church; however, the challenges are new, and the Church's ability to respond has changed.

Broadly speaking, the history of Catholics in the United States begins as a religious minority viewed with suspicion by the dominant White Anglo Saxon Protestant culture (Dolan, 2002). Since the 1960s and not coincidentally the Second Vatican Council, while external suspicions about Catholicism generally have subsided, intra-Catholic uncertainty mirroring larger cultural polarization has increased significantly (McGreevy, 2003). This internal tension about what it means to be Catholic in the early decades of the twenty-first century might be exemplified in the current debate over Joe Biden, elected the United States' second Catholic President in 2020, sharing

in communion during Mass (Sawyer, 2021). Throughout this history from colonial times to the present, American Catholic school teacher formation has reflected larger religious and cultural tensions in American society and the American Catholic Church.

The American Catholic Church had always been unified in differentiating between an external existential threat, which roughly prior to the 1960's was the Protestant American culture, from an internal matter of debate, such as whether Catholic schools were the best response to the influence of Protestantism specifically or a generic Americanism typified by disassociation from one's cultural or religious heritage (Bryk et al., 1993; McGreevy, 2003; Walch, 2016). The external tensions were two-fold. First, Catholic practices such as the Latin Mass, abstaining from meat on Fridays, a celibate clergy, maintaining the real presence in the Eucharist, allegiance to a foreign pope, and use of a different translation of the Bible distinguished Catholics from the religious mainstream in the United States. Further, Catholic organizations served the social, recreational, educational, and healthcare needs of Catholics literally from birth to death, all of which promoted clear religious identification of an "us" and "you" based on one's perspective. In other words, for Catholics, "we" maintain these practices, which distinguishes us from "you" non-Catholics. Alternatively, from the dominant Protestant view, "we" don't have the same practices "you" Catholics do. The second tension between Catholics and larger American culture related to the first: If Catholics maintained all those practices that distinguished themselves from mainstream Protestant American life, were they truly American? (Dolan, 2002; McGreevy, 2003).

Viewed today, the lines of demarcation seem simplistic, but one result was clarity of identity for Catholics, which made formation and preparation for teaching in Catholic schools straightforward. Catholic school teachers were expected to educate and form the next generation of Catholics to maintain identity and allegiance to a larger Catholic "us" that was defined by the distinctive Catholic practices and doctrines that delineated them from non-Catholics. Whether the teacher was a vowed religious or lay-person, this teacher was coming from a "thickly" Catholic culture that socialized one into a Catholic worldview and identity through mutually reinforcing faith practices and communal cultural norms (Smith et al., 2014, p. 26, as cited in Franchi & Rymarz, 2017, p. 2). Catholic schools were also tasked with making sure Catholic youth could access the same political, economic, social, and cultural opportunities afforded white Protestant Americans at the time. This responsibility necessitated using contemporary teaching pedagogy to provide an outstanding education, so students would be prepared to thrive in influential positions in the United States. Commitment to Catholic identity both sustained and was sustained by Catholic schools, which enculturated an allegiance to being both "Catholic" and "American" for the generation that came of age before the 1960's (Walch, 2016).

Today, frustration is growing in the United States evident in a distinct but unattributable sense of cultural malaise, social discontent, and political gridlock. It is not that no one can identify the cause, it is that everyone identifies a different cause. There is little consensus, only argument. Addressing this paralysis, Canadian

Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor theorizes that we live in a “secular age” characterized by an “immanent frame” that impedes our understanding of who we are in relation to the God who created us (Taylor, 2007). This materialist and exclusively scientific worldview is the contemporary default or “natural” order that is contrasted with a worldview that recognizes the world as charged with God’s grace in a way that transcends empirical explanation. Smith (2014) interprets Taylor thusly: “Some inhabit [the world] as a closed frame with a brass ceiling; others inhabit it as an open frame with skylights open to transcendence” (p. 93). It is not a question of knowledge or belief, but how one lives. If Taylor is right, the busy and distracted lives that disconnect Americans from their inner selves, one another, and God is not the cause but symptoms resulting from the limiting, pervasive, and unconscious worldview that impedes acknowledging God’s transcendence in the mystery of individual and communal lives. This is the changed cultural context that is at the root of the challenge to all American institutions today, especially organized religions like Catholicism.

The initial challenge of this pervasive worldview to Catholicism and the preparation and formation of Catholic school teachers is that it at least coincides with the “decline of the cultural religious paradigm” in the Anglosphere (Franchi & Rymarz, 2017, p. 3). Franchi and Rymarz (2017) summarize two major trends in response to this decline that are present in the United States (p. 4). First, the outright disaffiliation from Catholicism is increasing in the United States (McCarty & Vitek, 2018). Second, a significant percentage of young people may identify as Catholic, but Catholicism’s relevance in their lives is minimal, and they interpret and live their faith identity in their own terms (Clydesdale & Garces-Foley, 2019). It is this pool of Catholics from which Catholic school teachers are drawn today (Franchi & Rymarz, 2017). These teachers are not arriving in Catholic schools formed as Catholics able to witness and pass on the faith tradition and Catholic worldview because they themselves do not have foundational understandings or lived practices to support such a view. They need to be religiously formed, and this formation needs to recognize and respond to the default materialist worldview they have adopted.

Responding to this initial challenge of incompletely religiously formed, teachers manifests a polarization in the American Catholic Church that is another characteristic of contemporary American society (Steinfels, 2003). The same forces of exclusive secular materialism sustaining the contemporary worldview simultaneously decenter the individual from shared centers of meaning such as religious traditions. In place of shared centers of meaning that cohere communities is an ethic of individualism that makes the self and one’s own perceived needs the center of meaning and value. This individualism closes people off from collective wisdom rendering them susceptible to shallow cultural fads, quick-fix solutions, and demagoguery, all of which results in a polarization infecting social, political, and ecclesial institutions in the United States, including the Catholic Church. The American Catholic Church struggles with factionalism and has been unable to satisfactorily respond to the disintegration of the Catholic cultural paradigm, deterioration of Catholic practices and understanding, and ultimately disaffiliation from the Catholic Church (Avella, 2019). Such paralysis further deepens the anxiety that already motivate the polarizing forces

within the laity and hierarchy. In short, Catholic school leaders and teachers are in a cultural and religious context where religious identity and worldview cannot be taken for granted, and there is no consensus for how to respond to this challenge.

4.5 Responding to the Challenge

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2005) wrote: “The preparation and ongoing formation of new administrators and teachers is vital if our schools are to remain truly Catholic in all aspects of school life” (p. 10). To attain this, the attributes of these Catholic school leaders and teachers must be enumerated and the best practices and procedures to form these teachers identified. A process is therefore needed to develop standards for initial induction and ongoing formation of Catholic school teachers for their ministry in Catholic schools. The development of this process is important because there must be support from bishops, Catholic school leaders, and Catholic school scholars to develop and use these standards. The recent successful process to create and promulgate the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools* (NSBECS) provides a template to develop Catholic school teacher formation standards (Ozar & Weitzel-O’Neill, 2012).

The NSBECS document is the result of a process initiated in 2009 with conversation among Catholic school leaders, the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA), and Catholic school university scholars. Supporters of the initiative “voiced the conviction that collectively endorsed national standards supported and advocated by the Bishops offer the opportunity for the Catholic community to: clarify the ‘brand’ of ‘Catholic school’” (Ozar & Weitzel-O’Neill, 2012, p. vi). For over two years, an eight-person task force developed the document; this collaborative process went through multiple revisions and was reviewed by Catholic school leaders, bishops, university scholars, and teachers. A similar process to develop Catholic School teacher formation standards is envisioned.

The NSBECS document itself provides a rough template for what is needed. The NSBECS is based on the standards-based reform movement that recognizes clearly articulated standards motivate changes in schools. Standards are not magic wands, but they provide a starting point for revisions to school practices and culture (Ozar et al., 2019). The introduction explains that it “is intended to describe how the most mission-driven, program effective, well managed, and responsibly governed Catholic schools operate” (Ozar & Weitzel-O’Neill, 2012, p. vi). The standards and benchmarks are intended to provide measurable criteria to “determine how well a school is fulfilling its obligation to those who benefit from its services” (Ozar & Weitzel-O’Neill, 2012, p. vi). School communities are expected to implement the standards within their own context.

With the process to develop the NSBECS and the standards themselves as a model, the following is a proposal to develop Catholic school formation standards for use in United States Catholic schools.

- Enumerate essential attributes of Catholic school teachers.
- Once the essential attributes have been enumerated, the process needs to identify best practices to inculcate and enhance these attributes in teachers for Catholic schools.
- These attributes and best practices should be distilled into standards for “What Catholic school teachers need to know” and “What Catholic school teachers need to experience” and then broadly promulgated.
- Resources in both English and Spanish need to be aggregated and widely distributed to assist schools incorporating these guidelines as they implement induction and ongoing formation initiatives.
- Formation initiatives based on the guidelines should be evaluated for their efficacy; the guidelines can then be revised based on the outcomes.

The core of the resulting standards as envisioned could be the twin domains “What Catholic School teachers need to know” and “What Catholic school teachers need to experience.” A number of anticipated foundational premises for the standards in these domains are proposed below, though they will need to be evaluated by the committee developing the standards.

First, per the NSBECS, the initial defining characteristic of a Catholic school is that it is “Centered on the Person of Christ.” Specifically:

Catholic education is rooted in the conviction that Jesus Christ provides the most comprehensive and compelling example of the realization of full human potential... In every aspect of programs, life, and activities, Catholic schools should foster personal relationship with Jesus Christ and communal witness to the Gospel message of love of God and neighbor and service to the world, especially the poor and marginalized. (Ozar & Weitzel-O’Neill, 2012, p. 2)

Starting with Jesus Christ will not automatically bring back a Catholic cultural paradigm or heal polarizing tendencies in the American Catholic Church, but it is the essential and integrating place for all commitment, conversation, and conversion to begin.

Second, everyone’s faith story is dynamic, so the Catholic context of the school and the teacher’s background and experience must be taken into account. Some teachers may need additional guidance in understanding their role in a Catholic school. As explained by a Catholic high school Dean of Faculty Formation: “Everyone has a faith story and we need our faculty to understand that. Even those that claim no faith need to participate in our faculty formation programs” (J. Schulte, personal communication, June 21, 2021). The guidelines should provide a basis for these conversations.

Third, an ongoing formation process for the length of a teacher’s time in Catholic schools is anticipated. One is always journeying toward God; one is never “finished.” However, the guidelines should recognize phases in one’s formation for Catholic schools. An initial phase could be an introduction to the school and Catholic education during the hiring and orientation process; a second induction phase includes approximately the first three years of teaching (Williby, 2004); ongoing formation fulfills the third phase.

Fourth, the format for ongoing education and formation is crucial. Relying solely on a presenter giving information to faculty every few months, though well-intentioned and efficient, is not an effective model for faculty formation. The guidelines should incorporate modes of encounter beyond direct instruction such as discussion, faith sharing, and personal mentorship. Additionally, ongoing self-reflection, adjustment of practice and disposition, and personal evaluation are integral parts of Catholic school teacher formation.

The benefits of Catholic school teacher formation standards are obvious. Consistent expectations across dioceses would foster collaboration, lower costs, and increase effectiveness of ongoing formational initiatives, especially among smaller dioceses and schools. For example, if every Catholic school teacher were expected to have highly similar educational and formational experiences, publishers and consultants would be better able to provide resources to support the standards. Additionally, teacher preparation programs at Catholic institutions would have a guide to enhance existing initiatives or develop new programs for pre-service formation of those aspiring to teach in Catholic schools.

The challenges to develop and promulgate the above proposal are equally clear. A process to develop guidelines as envisioned above takes a significant commitment of resources. Developing the NSBECS and the accompanying Catholic School Standards Project (CSSP) was a multi-year endeavor that only funded the development of the standards and the first phase of research on their implementation. For instance, lack of resources has indefinitely delayed the anticipated subsequent research into the standards' relationship to measurable outcomes (Ozar et al., 2019; Ozar, personal communication, July 15, 2021). Another challenge is the lack of time in some schools to support even a modest commitment to develop procedures to induct new teachers and facilitate ongoing formation. This has proven true for implementing the NSBECS (Ozar et al., 2019).

4.6 Conclusion

A coherent and consistent articulation of what a Catholic school teacher needs to know and experience in initial and ongoing formation would be a small step toward helping Catholic school teachers recognize and live God's grace through their roles in Catholic schools. When convicted teachers do this, they provide witness for the next generation of Americans and Catholics. The internal tensions of polarization in the American Church will not be immediately overcome, but standards for Catholic school teacher formation similar to the NSBECS based on Jesus Christ and the Church's collective wisdom are the core that grounds everyone in the foundation of our Church.

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