



School Pastors/Chaplains/Principals Guide

Diocese of Buffalo

Introduction

A Catholic school can bring life, young families, and vocations to parishes. As the shepherd of the entire school community, the pastor plays a pivotal role in shaping the spiritual lives of students, parents, teachers, aides, and administrators. This relationship fosters a profound spiritual impact within their personal lives. While some pastors may note the absence of school families at Sunday Mass and the strain of school subsidies on parish resources, it's important to recognize that schools offer more interactions with young families than any other ministry. These families come to your parish five times a week, providing a unique opportunity for evangelization. A personal invitation from you to attend Mass can make a significant difference in their participation.

Below, you'll find a guide to help pastors discern whether to take on a parish assignment with a school and to assist current pastors in fulfilling these responsibilities more effectively.

The Role of the Parish School Pastor

As the chief administrator of a parish, the pastor oversees all ministries. While the pastor hires the principal to manage the school, he retains administrative oversight of the principal's performance, the budget, and the facility. However, the pastor's role extends beyond administration. He is the chief teacher and the promoter of Catholic identity across all ministries. He should ensure that religious education is coordinated across all ministries, integrating the Catholic school with the parish and vice versa. Additionally, the pastor should be involved in major personnel issues and any potential Safe Environment violations or investigations.

The Role of the Chaplain in a Parish School

The chaplain serves on the Board of Limited Jurisdiction and oversees the pastoral care of the students, staff, and families of the parish. The chaplain is encouraged to participate in the annual evaluation of the principal, alongside the School Board, and to facilitate goal-setting and the professional development of the school leader. The principal's evaluation follows the process and policies established by the Department of Catholic Schools (DCS). In certain situations, the Family Pastor might also serve as the chaplain, but more commonly, a priest from the parish family will be assigned as the School Chaplain.

The Role of the Chaplain in a Regional School

Appointed by the Bishop to serve as the Chaplain of a regional school, the chaplain holds many of the same responsibilities as the pastor in terms of pastoral care for the Catholic school community. However, administrative oversight and fiduciary responsibility lie with the board structure. For example, the principal's contract is signed by the Board Chair.

Regional schools have a two-tier board structure. Each school has a Board of Members, on which the Chaplain sits alongside the Bishop, Vicar General, Chancellor, and Secretary of Education. The Chaplain also serves on the Board of Trustees, which has administrative oversight and fiduciary responsibility for all aspects of the regional school. However, the power of the Board of Trustees is limited, as they are appointed by the Board of Members, and any significant changes to the school program or annual budget must be approved by the Board of Members.

The Chaplain has three primary responsibilities:

1. To provide a ministerial presence in the school and arrange for local priests to celebrate Mass.
2. To support the work of the Board of Trustees.
3. To represent the Board of Members, especially the Bishop, within the school.

The Role of the School Board in a Parish School

The School Board's authority is limited by the powers reserved for the pastor and bishop, such as changing programs, selling real estate, hiring staff, and administering pastoral care of the school community. The Board has three specific areas of responsibility:

1. **Overseeing and monitoring school finances:** While the parish plays a significant role in determining the parish investment, the Board should be actively involved in the budgeting process.
2. **Finding, evaluating, and supporting the principal:** Although the Pastor signs the principal's contract, the Board participates in the search and interview process.
3. **Supporting and supplementing the school's advancement efforts:** This includes marketing, enrollment management, and fundraising.

Resources

- [Operating Principles](#) for parish school boards
- [Bylaws](#) for regional schools
- [Policies](#) for Catholic Schools. Notice that principals must be notified by April 1st if their contract is not going to be renewed (policy 4702.7). Policy 4760 pertains to dispute resolution and grievance procedures.
- [Procedure Manual](#) for Elementary Schools

- Forms, Contracts, etc. All can be found [on the website](#)
- Monthly [principal tasks](#).
- Weekly [Leading with Faith](#) Newsletter
- [National Standards](#) for Effective Catholic Schools
- [Principal job description](#) & [evaluation tool](#) & [instructions memo](#).

The Role of the Department of Catholic Schools

The Department of Catholic Schools (DCS) is dedicated to serving Catholic schools and ensuring the success of every pastor and canonical administrator. The DCS offers support in various areas:

- **The Superintendent:** Assists with policies, bylaws, Advisory Boards, school accountability measures, and personnel issues.
- **The Assistant Superintendent for Academics:** Supports teaching evaluation, curricular questions (including religion curriculum), accreditation, professional development, assessment and academic programs.
- **The Assistant Superintendent for Government Services:** Helps with government services, reimbursements, and government programs.
- **The STREAM Consultant:** Provides assistance with the STREAM program.
- **The Administrative Assistant:** Can help with transcripts, elementary athletic questions, and finding answers to any other questions.
- **The HR Department:** Guides pastors and canonical administrators through difficult personnel issues and answers questions about benefits and payroll.

Additionally, the Diocesan Advisory Council conducts annual training for Advisory Boards and monitors the fiscal health of schools to develop the school health scorecard. The DCS schedules various professional development opportunities, including five all-day sessions for principals, weekly Zoom calls, monthly Zoom professional development, a fall professional development day for teachers, and catechetical training and certification.

Important Reminders

1. Please contact HR or the Superintendent before terminating or non-renewing any contracts. While principals are hired by pastors and canonical administrators, Diocesan policy requires the involvement of the DCS. The recommended hiring process is detailed in the policies manual.
2. Diocesan HR policies must be followed when hiring, evaluating, disciplining, and terminating employees. Be sure to consult these policies before taking any action.
3. Board and HSA problems often arise when roles and boundaries are not clearly defined and monitored. The DCS is available to help with these issues.

4. The DCS emphasizes that schools should not rely on more than a 10% subsidy.
5. Unionized schools present a different set of challenges. Ensure you have a copy of your Collective Bargaining Agreement, and the DCS can help interpret it.

Pastor, School Chaplain and Principal

To develop a strong relationship and partnership between the Pastor, School Chaplain, and Principal, it is essential to meet monthly. Regular meetings foster open communication, ensure alignment on goals and priorities, and build a collaborative team dynamic that benefits the entire school community.

Sample School Leadership (Pastor, School Chaplain, Principal) Meeting Agenda

Date: [Month, Day, Year]

Time: [Start Time] – [End Time]

Location: [Meeting Location]

Attendees:

- [Principal's Name, Title]
- [Pastor's Name, Title]
- [Chaplain's Name, Title]

1. Opening Prayer

- Led by [Pastor/Chaplain]

2. Catholic Identity and Mission Articulation

- Mission Articulation:
 - Strategies for articulating the Catholic mission to the school community
- Modeling Values:
 - Consistently modeling Catholic values and leading spiritual activities

3. Liturgical Planning

- Upcoming Liturgical Events and Celebrations:
 - Event 1: [Description, Date]
 - Planning and responsibilities
 - Event 2: [Description, Date]
 - Planning and responsibilities
- Faith Integration:

- Strategies to create environments reflecting Catholic identity
- Integration of liturgical seasons and celebrations

4. School Enrollment

- Enrollment Statistics:
 - Current enrollment numbers
 - Trends and projections
- Enrollment Strategies:
 - Marketing and outreach initiatives
 - Engaging the community and prospective families

4. Communication Strategies

- Internal Communication:
 - Effective communication within the school community
 - Strategies for faculty, staff, and student engagement
- External Communication:
 - Building relationships with parents, parish, and local community
 - Promoting the school's mission and activities

5. School Budget and Resource Planning

- Budget Overview:
 - Current financial status
 - Review of income and expenditures
- Resource Allocation:
 - Allocation of resources to support school programs and initiatives
 - Planning for future financial needs

10. Action Items Review

- Previous Action Items:
 - [Action Item 1: Status]
 - [Action Item 2: Status]
- New Action Items:

- [Action Item 1]
- [Action Item 2]

11. Other Business

- Open floor for additional topics and discussion.

12. Closing Prayer

- Led by [Pastor/Chaplain]

Next Meeting: [Date, Time, Location]

Chaplain-Principal Meetings

To develop a strong relationship and partnership between the School Chaplain, and Principal, it is essential to meet weekly. Regular meetings foster open communication, ensure alignment on goals and priorities, and build a collaborative team dynamic that benefits the entire school community.

Weekly meeting topics could be used to supplement the weekly discussion of “what’s going on?” and “what’s coming up?”

- If a parent were to come to the chaplain to complain about the principal, how should that be handled? (and vice versa)
- If a board member were to complain to the chaplain that the principal needs to be fired, how should the chaplain respond?
- A parent mentions to the principal that she would like to become Catholic. How should this be handled?
- The chaplain reports that he is treated rather rudely by a teacher. How should this be addressed?
- The principal notices that late arrivals are higher on Mass days. What can be done?
- The pastor mentions that parents who are receiving the parish discount are never seen at Sunday Mass. How should this be handled?
- How can we generate family participation in the parish?
- The pastor tells the chaplain that he heard the principal is interested in another position. What would be the best way to address this?
- A parishioner reports to the chaplain that the school janitor is smoking outside near the dumpster during the school day. What should the chaplain do?
- The basketball coach calls the principal to report that the parish youth group is using the gym when he thought they were having practice. What should the principal do?
- In an 8th grade religion class after Thanksgiving, the chaplain asked the class to define the Immaculate Conception and not a single student answered correctly. What should he do?

- Several parents reported to the principal that the person answering the parish phone was rude and unwelcoming. What should the principal do?
- A parish trustee said to the principal in the church foyer that the parish subsidy was going to be reduced by \$100k next year. What should the principal do?
- The parish DRE reported to the pastor that the 6th grade religion teacher is not teaching correctly. What should the pastor do?
- A parent emails the chaplain to report that the 3rd grade teacher is not teaching effectively. What should the chaplain do?
- A parent reports to the principal that her pastor denied her a subsidy because he said her family was not active. What should the principal do?
- The chaplain notices a number of Christmas decorations in the week after Thanksgiving and hears a few teachers saying “Merry Christmas.” He is upset that Advent is not being celebrated. What should he do?
- The pastor has requested that no meat be served in the cafeteria during Lent; the school lunch is provided by the public schools and will include meat options even during Lent; the chaplain says he thinks the school should proceed as they’ve always done. The principal feels caught in the middle.
- Traditionally, the school has allowed each student to come forward for Communion. Those who haven’t received their First Communion are given a blessing. The chaplain only wants those who’ve received their First Communion to come forward. What should the principal do?
- The chaplain realizes that the school does not teach religion every day and thus wants that changed. The principal does not want to change the schedule in the middle of the year. How should they proceed?
- The principal has placed a teacher on an Improvement Plan but the teacher is not improving. The pastor mentions to the chaplain that the teacher is an active parishioner and he hopes that the teacher is not fired. How should they proceed?
- The chaplain is upset that many of the students look disheveled and out of uniform. He speaks to students during Mass about not wearing such ratty clothing. Then a parent calls the principal asking why the priest is talking about school uniforms during Mass. How should they proceed?
- On the day of a student honors assembly in the gym, the principal walks in to see parishioners setting up for a funeral reception. How should the principal proceed?

Best Practices for School Leadership

- Celebrate a weekly school Mass and extend personal invitations to school families.
- Greet children and families at the school entrance once a week in the morning.

- Visit classrooms weekly to engage with students and teachers.
- Enjoy lunch in the cafeteria once a month to connect with students.
- Participate in after-school events, such as cheering for games.
- Support fundraising events by offering your time (e.g., hosting a meal at the rectory).
- Reach out to welcome new families and invite them to attend Mass.
- Contact students who have been ill to check on their well-being.
- Be present at Open Houses, concerts, performances, and other school events.
- Wear school merchandise to show support.
- Attend and actively participate in School Board meetings.
- Attend at least one Home and School Association (HSA) meeting each year.
- Principal/school chaplain meets weekly at a scheduled time and place.
- Support the principal with kindness and encouragement.
- Attend a faculty meeting twice a year to offer support and foster fellowship.
- Host a Mass for faculty and staff at the beginning of the year to bless them in their ministry.
- Provide input on the school calendar before it is finalized.
- Offer to guest lecture on religious topics; engage with religion teachers about their curriculum questions and challenges.
- Host a lunch for faculty and staff each year.
- Publicize school events within the parish community.
- Invite parents to engage with the parish.
- Write brief reflections for the weekly parent newsletter.
- Keep neighboring pastors (without schools) informed about school events and opportunities.
- Consider attending Notre Dame's Pastor's Institute in the summer.