

# The Audacity of Indifference:



## Lessons Learned from the Closing of the Memphis Jubilee Schools

*Bernard Dumond, President & CEO of Development Innovations 360*

**O**n January 23, 2018, like many others in our Catholic educational community, I learned the disheartening news of the closing of the Jubilee Schools of the Diocese of Memphis. As a Catholic school advocate who focuses my ministry work on providing vitality and sustainability strategies for these institutions, the demise of these diocesan schools is especially troubling.

Once hailed as a true success story, the Jubilee Schools represented forward thinking, strong community partnerships, and an innovative approach to the financial challenges facing Catholic schools.

According to the latest statistics by the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) in 2016-17, 16 new schools were opened and 110 schools were consolidated or closed. While it is abundantly clear that Catholic schools are declining in numbers, it is the indifference to this issue by our leaders that remains intolerable.

### *Where is the outrage over the closing of our beloved Catholic schools?*

As we examine the current state of restrictive financial models, increased marketplace competition and our ever-growing dependency on pervasive fundraising activity, all Catholic schools remain vulnerable to the destructive forces that crippled the Jubilee Schools.

It is indeed time for a new approach. But first, we must explore the issues relative to the closing of the Jubilee Schools.

### **So, what went wrong and what can we learn?**

#### *Leadership Challenges*

Over the course of its 20-year history serving youth in urban areas, this system of nine schools experienced high levels of administrative turnover, faculty and staff instability and upon the departure of its founder (in 2012) began to lose its unifying mission and momentum.

#### *Academic Issues*

With leadership and faculty turnover, the academic commitment becomes a concern. Student performance is uneven and doubts are raised about curriculum, parent involvement and Catholic Identity.

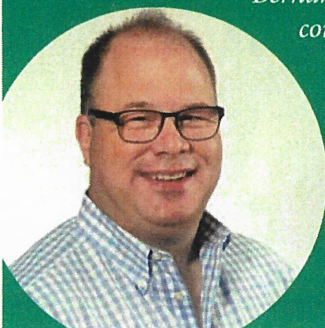
#### *Financial Instability*

Urban schools under the Jubilee Schools model, require a diversified set of revenue streams and a dependency on philanthropic activity to achieve operational vitality. Due to the economic realities in these neighborhoods, parents are simply not able to pay full – or even partial – tuition and required fees. This reliance on a small group of donors and

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*contributed this blog  
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corporate sponsors became a daunting task—and even more daunting without a clear vision of the mission of the schools. The schools at one time had a large endowment (\$38 million) but fundraising efforts fell short and the corpus of the endowment was utilized to plug funding gaps.

## Enrollment Decline

Plagued by leadership uncertainty, faculty turnover and financial decline, the resulting paradox becomes declining enrollment. Unsatisfied parents seek other educational options and the mission and promise is diminished. The perception of value is compromised and the exodus has devastating consequences. Without students, this life-giving ministry of the Catholic Church ceases to function.

### So where do we go from here?

The first lesson learned of the closing of the Jubilee Schools is that if we do not innovate, we will continue to decline. New approaches and solutions are necessary for the mission of Catholic schools to advance. The traditional revenue model of tuition, parish subsidy and fundraising is clearly flawed and unsound. New and recurring revenue sources must be secured and long-term philanthropic support becomes a top priority.

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The second valuable lesson learned from the demise of the Jubilee Schools is that the quality of leadership and academics play a major role in the value proposition presented to parents. Administrators must be collaborative and visionary while cultivating a culture of innovation and engagement. We need to hire and retain the best teachers and support them in the vocation of Catholic education.

The third important lesson learned from the loss of the Jubilee Schools is that market competition demands that we create a very special student experience where young people are valued, challenged, and encouraged to find God’s place in their lives. Our Catholic schools must be a safe place of discovery and growth. We must also tell this story of distinction and success through strong marketing and communication efforts. We must be attractive in order to attract others.

### So, what can we do?

The closing of the Jubilee Schools needs to reverberate through our Catholic community like a beckoning alarm. When one of our schools closes its doors, we all suffer and the mission of the universal Catholic Church is weakened.

The good news is that we can begin working at the diocesan and parish level to ensure thriving Catholic schools. Here are some workable strategies that can transform our Catholic school mission and ministry:



## *Strive to be a Catholic School of Vitality and Distinction*

- Focus on high standards, quality in all areas, transparency and customer service.
- Create and implement a Strategic Vision with bold priorities, dedicated resources and monthly monitoring.
- Establish the school as a School of Distinction with excellence as a cultural value.

## *Build a Culture of Continuous Improvement and Innovation*

- Encourage teachers to experiment with new techniques and methods.
- Establish the Faculty Innovation Team to bring fresh ideas to the school community.
- Create the Faculty Innovation Award to recognize academic advancements.



## *Implement a Process to Determine New Funding Models and Growth Strategies*

- Establish a Resource and Revenue Task Force to identify and implement new funding models that offer a variety of financial options and choices for parents, donors and corporate entities.
- Cultivate a growth mindset by implementing proactive strategies and embracing change as opportunities.
- Be patient and persistent in the wake of change and evolution. Share the purpose and rationale for all decisions. Be transparent and open to feedback.

## *Engage More People in the Mission and Vision of the School*

- Tap into the abundance of talent within your parish and school community. Right now, people are waiting for your invitation. Through personal invitation, allow them to help solve your challenges and secure the needed resources for growth.
- Each year, conduct a Vision and Vitality Summit. Invite the community on campus to hear about the great work of your school and ask them to give input into the top priorities for the coming year.
- Listen and respond to the needs of your teachers, parents, alumni, donors and friends. Find out – through formal surveys and informal conversations – the current state of the school. Implement policy and procedures that make people feel valued and recognized.



## *Be Intentional about Enrollment Growth*

- Understand the educational marketplace and the decision-drivers for families. Offer a value proposition that is desired and affordable.
- Recognize that enrollment is the life-blood of the school and all activities are connected to retaining and attracting families. Everyone is responsible for enrollment growth.
- Implement a year-round Strategic Enrollment Management Plan that is intentional, strategic and deliberate and responsive to the needs of the market. Eliminate generic appeals and customize your approach to each interested family.

## *Execute a Monthly Marketing and Communications Plan*

- Properly manage the story of your school through creative marketing and communications strategies that take full advantage of digital platforms. Tailor your messages for targeted groups and audiences.
- Create a new school website as a marketing tool. No longer is the website an online bulletin board. Design the new website to appeal to a variety of users with portals filled with relative content.
- Establish your compelling message through 5-7 branding statements that form the foundation of all marketing and communication pieces – from social media to printed materials. Utilize the talents of professional vendors to give your school brand a polished and refined image.

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*For over 20 years, Mr. Dumond has been a sought-after speaker, process facilitator, writer and leadership coach, believing that all Catholic schools can create growth and sustainability. His framework for innovation, The Seven Circles of Catholic School Vitality was presented at the NCEA Convention in Cincinnati in April. He is a husband and a father to two daughters and active in his parish, the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist in Lafayette, LA, serving in numerous volunteer capacities for the church and school.*

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## **The time is NOW to begin the Catholic School Vitality Movement!**

Although the closing of the Jubilee Schools is the latest high-profile example of the vulnerable state of Catholic education, there is much to celebrate. New schools are opening, quality leadership is emerging and new thinking is gaining traction.

However, every movement demands a passionate champion that can rally the cause in their local diocese or school. This champion is you! It is simply not enough to be a believer in Catholic schools, we must be believable.

Our believability is built on action and the time to act is now. Organize a meeting next week with interested people who can begin the conversation about the value of Catholic school vitality.

*I stand with you as a passionate champion for Catholic schools, knowing that the future is bright and God's grace is with us. Onward!*



Development Innovations 360 is an innovative consulting group. Based in Lafayette, LA, we are committed to providing full circle strategic partnerships that build capacity and meaningful relationships, ensuring vitality and sustainability for parishes, schools and dioceses.

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