

PEOPLE-DRIVEN SCHOOLS

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with our High School students."**

The foundation of the Catholic school system is its "social capital". This social capital is the people who share our school values and the people who agree on basic religious and educational concerns. Dr. James Coleman, in his research at the University of Chicago, refers to these sustaining groups as the "functioning and supporting communities" of the Catholics schools. These are the people who are responsible for our birth, growth, and our sustenance.

Like our financial capital, our people-support is a treasure which we dare not lose. However, as we move the zoom lens close to delineate the linkages of this network, we will find that our social capital is gradually eroding. Much of this valued asset is disintegrating right in front of our eyes.

Many of our nearby manicured residences no longer have kids in them. In fact, only 23% of all households in the United States have children of school age in them! Furthermore, the loosening of family structures limits the possibility of other parents, who have school-age children, being directly involved in the life of the school.

Too, as more Catholic parents adopt a cafeteria-style approach in their selection of Church offerings, we may find that Catholic education is not one of the more popular choices. Some parents who are getting caught up in the trappings of society, or who cannot pay for a home and a Catholic education, or who wish to save money for a college education for their children, are trading off a Catholic-school education for some other preferred commodity. These realities, all taken together, are more than just an erosion. Their consequences send tremors into the school bedrock!

Today's communication from the school to the home must be more than a paper trail. We need to have a feeling for what is going on in these homes and we must do this with a sense of mission, and not just as another job. This must become our main interest.

Our schools need also to become age-integrated. Senior citizens should be invited to take courses with our high school students where space permits, and at no charge. Parents may also wish to sample some attractive courses in our curriculum. All of this will bring an exciting challenge to our faculties and at the same time forge a new bond between the school and the community it serves.

Volunteers also need to be included in our new social capital. Many people are waiting in the wings for an invitation to be part of our school life and to invest in what they perceive to be an exciting adventure. In this age of volunteering, our Lasallian Association must open wide its gates to accept these generous people.

Our alumni are also part of this social capital. In La Salle's view these organizations were to be established in every school so that former students would persevere in the spirit of the school. He advocated retreats and days of recollection for them. He gave them something of substance. Our alumni should be included in our educational process and not just be looked upon as a reservoir to be tapped when the school needs financial help.

And how about the other 77% – those who, as statistics indicate, are not connected with high schools anywhere? What a terrific market for us! Three-

fourths of the nation is there for us to spread our message. Friends, neighbors, alumni, alumni parents, grandparents, businesses, and all those others, who until now have never heard of us, are all part of this untouched market.

Our schools need to be articulate communicators to the general public. Our daily work in school, with each educator in a separate classroom or office, identifies us as working in a loosely coupled organization. For the most part we work alone and do not have to deal often with adults, even with fellow teachers in close association, unless we choose to do so. This has left an insular mark on the teaching profession. And it is one that we must remove quickly before our elusive social capital goes bye-bye.

We do not need believers. We need disciples. The difference is that disciples invest themselves in the

activity. In times past our outreach was limited to parents and alumni, and they are the reason why we are alive today. Now, however, we must add "new" social capital in addition to our parents and alumni. We discovered years ago that "new" financial capital was needed and we pursued this insight with great success.

It would be a terrible irony if we did not have the disciples within our schools who feel that adult activities – volunteers, adult education, business linkages, to name a few – are important enough for faculty involvement. If this is the case, we may be going the way of the railroads. Passenger trains served a real need, but yet private passenger carriers went out of business. Apparently the managers and workers were just looking down the same old tracks each day and they did not observe the changing landscape. And, believe me, our educational landscape is changing!

Brother Terence McLaughlin