



INSTITUTE OF SCHOOL & PARISH DEVELOPMENT

Bringing People, Process, and Ministry Together to Build the

Kingdom of God.

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Development Directions

“BACK TO SCHOOL NIGHT” AND VISION ARTICULATION: WONDERFUL OPPORTUNITIES GALORE WITH THE BEGINNING OF A NEW SCHOOL YEAR!

by

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All across the country, Catholic schools have either opened for the 2011 – 2012 school year, are opening this week, or plan to open their doors right before or after Labor Day. What a wonderful time for Marketing and Catholic Development personnel and efforts to step up and make a difference. Now can be teachable and/or impressionable moments.

Let's look at the infamous “**Back to School Night**”. This is one that most all Catholic schools open up with, and for many, this is where first impressions are made – especially for new families and for new faculty and staff members. *How many WOW moments will your “Back to School Night” have?* Or will it be the same as the last 5-10 years? Will you use this opportunity to really kick off the new school year with a bang, or will you pull out the old schedule from the last few years and go through the motions?

Here is how many “**Back to School Nights**” operate:

- Parents meet in the gym or cafeteria or auditorium.
- Opening remarks from administration and welcome back
- Introduction of new faculty and staff
- Introduction of the “old timers”
- Parents then “run thru” their child’s schedule with the bells ringing, the hallways jammed, parents getting lost, and the teachers having all of 7 minutes to explain everything parents need to know about their class and how that teacher operates.

- The final bell rings and parents and faculty and staff meet back in the gym for coffee, punch, cookies and a big WELCOME BACK cake, and we can finally put that **“Back to School Night”** to bed for another year.

Maybe or maybe not the above sounds familiar. I don't know. I do know that many Catholic schools run their **“Back to School Night”** very similar to what is outlined above.

So, the question comes up: How can you change it? What can you do to make sure the **“Back to School Night”** has many WOW factors? What can you do to make sure that when parents leave and walk back to their cars (or stand in the parking lot where most real conversations take place) they emphatically say, **“YES! This is why we send our children to this school!”**

Where do these WOW factors lie? What can be done to have parents leave feeling so good about their choice of schools that they will want to cry it out to the mountain top? Here are some suggestions:

- Why not have some of your present parent leaders call every family in the school and personally invite them to attend **“Back to School Night”** and say how excited they are about the new school year? Simply welcome people into your Faith Community.
- Why not have students in the parking lots welcoming everyone who drives up and handing them an agenda or prayer card for the evening?
- Why not consider making teams of parents (3-5 on each team) whose children have the same classes and have a student, parent or faculty/staff member be their “guide” and “host” for the evening?
- Why not have a Parent Buddy System in place to announce that evening, where every new family at the school will be able to meet their “Buddy” family for the year?
- Why not have some kind of game for a handful of new and returning parents to play at the end of the evening (like Jeopardy, Pictionary, etc.) that relates to the new school year?
- Why not hand to every parent a card that asks this question: “As a parent, how will you know that the school year is really going well for you and your family – by October 1st?” Have each parent hand their card back in before they leave. Please publish the results in the next parent communication, and as an administration, faculty, staff, and leaders, work on the suggestions.
- Why not have decorations up outside and inside that reflect a genuine WELCOME to all families involved in your Catholic school?

- Why not invite a student or two who graduated last year or the year before (a student that a lot of your parents would know) come and talk about the value of his/her education at your school? (3-4 minutes)
- Why not have one of your teachers, parents, alums, parishioners, or any person associated with your school who has the expertise prepare an outstanding slide/video presentation (with dynamic music) that heralds and touts the wonderful people, events, and charism of your Catholic school? Possibly have all leave with this visual fresh in their mind.
- Why not hand each parent a 6" x 10" card when they leave with an appealing visual on the front of 2-4 students and the caption: THANK YOU FOR BEING OUR PARTNER IN THE (NAME OF SCHOOL) FAITH COMMUNITY!

Now is the time to re-think, which leads us to the second piece of this article: articulating your vision. Not only is "**Back to School Night**" a wonderful time to articulate the vision for the future of your school, but there are many opportunities with school beginning. New meetings with faculty and staff, meetings with student leaders and the entire student body, meetings with parent leaders, with boards, the first PTA meetings, your welcome letter home, and the list goes on.

Your vision – what is it? What are your plans for this year? For next year? For 3-5 years from now? What is exciting about your school? What do you want to brag about? What do you want to let people know that you are so proud of? Last week my wife and I attended my daughter's 8th grade orientation at the 8 – 12 high school she will be attending. We left impressed for many reasons, but one of the main reasons was because as we walked in the door a Student Ambassador handed us a booklet that listed the 2011 graduating seniors and what college scholarships they had received. WOW! Almost every senior at that school had received some form of a college scholarship, and they were listed by name and by university. To us, that was a WOW! effect.

We hear the word vision all of the time, but what does it mean? And, why is it so important? Great questions, so let's spend a moment on these two.

First, vision is when we stand at the top of the mountain, look out into the distance and see all the things we would like to have happen over the next 1-3-5+ years at our Catholic school and/or parish. These are things that are attainable; these are items that grow out of planning and visioning sessions; these are goals that are measurable and achievable, and they excite you and they excite others.

They could be items concerning the curriculum, or your service program or your facilities, or your personnel, or your endowment, or one of your departments, or your community outreach, or your Catholic identity, or your collaborative relationships with hospitals, universities, and/or businesses. Your vision distinguishes you; it makes you unique.

Now is the time to articulate your vision – in these meetings and get-togethers that start a new school year, in your letters and correspondence home, and on your website -- plus other venues.

“Back to School Night” and Vision Articulation: Two opportunities of which you really should take advantage.

ISPD welcomes you back to an exciting time in Catholic Development.