

Catalyst: Bringing the Lasallian Charism to Public Schools



“We teach not because the pupils are Catholic, but because we are Catholic.”

The Lasallian mission of providing for the educational needs of the economically poor and disenfranchised children and families in low-income neighborhoods led to the establishment of San Miguel Schools in several cities of the United States. These small elementary or middle schools are not tuition-driven and serve students and families from all faiths and cultures.

In 1995, Brothers Ed Siderewicz and Gordon Hannon were inspired with the idea of opening a San Miguel school in the south side of Chicago. It would be a private, Catholic, tuition-free middle school that would reclaim children who were being lost in the large, impersonal public system or who were simply wandering the streets. They found an ideal location in an immigrant community of largely first generation Mexican families without resources, without educational choice, and without many of the basic necessities of life.

“We moved into the old convent in the Back of the Yards, at 48th and Damen, on June 14, 1995,”

“Catalyst delivers results beyond the ordinary—we value each individual, hard work, and right relationships, and we set our sights on college graduation...starting in kindergarten.”—Gordon Hannon, CEO, Catalyst Schools Network

explained Bro. Ed. By July, they had initiated a five-week summer program for youth in the neighborhood. “We got students [to come] by promoting this through the three local parishes and, largely, word of mouth—and a humble flyer we created.”

The overwhelming response by the community led to the establishment of San Miguel School in the fall of 1995, starting with grade 6. Its goal was to give kids the best education possible and position them for entrance into reputable high schools. “For me, it was the [Lasallian] Charism at work: this God-given gift to the world that attracts the poor to it,” said Bro. Ed. “The poor somehow recognize this gift; they are attracted to it.”

In the fall of 2002, the Gary Comer Campus brought the San Miguel model to the west side of Chicago. For years the founders, board, and donors of San Miguel had expressed the desire to duplicate the success of the San Miguel model in another community in Chicago, but funds were limited for such an endeavor. In 2002, Lands’ End founder Gary Comer presented a generous and bold \$1.2 million grant to San Miguel to start a San Miguel School in the Austin neighborhood of Chicago. Seven years later, the San Miguel School–Gary Comer Campus has become a beacon of hope on the West Side.

SAN MIGUEL MODEL IN A PUBLIC SCHOOL SETTING

The San Miguel model is simple. It is designed with the following goals in mind:

- Establish a faith based middle school (grades 5 or 6 to 8).

- Create a Family and Community Outreach program rooted in social work practices.
- Develop a Graduate Support Program.
- Build a strong Board focused on Development.

Two years after San Miguel–Back of the Yards opened, Paul Vallas CEO of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), approached the founders of the school and invited them to replicate San Miguel as a charter school. The Brothers’ answer was “no.” “We cannot do that because this is who we are,” explained Bro. Ed. “We provide a human and Christian education for the poor, and we are closely aligned with our Catholic tradition. . . . We would have to compromise who we are and what we do, as well as the authenticity and integrity of our mission.” There were several more attempts to encourage the Brothers to accept the invitation, but their answer was always “no.” When Arne Duncan (now Secretary of Education) assumed the CEO position, he continued the same campaign as his predecessor. “How many of these schools can you do?” he asked, offering to work with the San Miguel team. But the answer was still “no.”

After several more meetings, Duncan said, “Brother, we can do this.” The conversations continued for five or six years, focusing on *how do we do this* rather than what do we have to give up. Finally, the Brothers came to the conclusion that the only way to find out if this could be done is by doing it.

Because San Miguel had no way to expand its mission of educating the poor and disadvantaged due to cost and constraints to raise funds, it was

determined to attempt to implement its basic model as a public school in the Lasallian tradition. The San Miguel board endorsed the management of a charter school and so it was decided that an application for a charter school would be submitted. The charter was approved by CPS in 2005 with a projected opening in 2006. “CPS threw a curve when they said they would give us a charter, but asked us to accept two schools rather than just one,” said Bro. Ed. An agreement was struck and two new schools were opened—Catalyst–Howland Charter School in 2006 and Catalyst–Circle Rock Charter School in 2007. Both were located in impoverished communities.

VALUES EDUCATION: THE FOUNDATION OF A CATALYST SCHOOL

The Catalyst Schools Network was born from the model established by the founders of San Miguel Schools Chicago with K-8 populations and a capacity of approximately 500 children in each. Taking the ethos and paradigm of San Miguel, the Catalyst Schools have translated the faith inspired movement into a values based program for children. These schools offer a graduate support component, a family and community outreach component, and a spiritual formation component focused on character development. The schools require a longer school day, a longer year than CPS schools, an enrichment program, a strong focus on math, reading and language arts, and after school programming.

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CATALYST

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The six pillars of character constitute the foundation of Catalyst education. Everything that happens in the school centers on trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. These attributes can be viewed as biblical values, if we look at them from the perspective of faith. They are also commonly held human and social values and offer a public school a vehicle for helping parents and guardians shape the character of their child without an appeal to denominational religion or a specific faith tradition.

The Catalyst Schools' culture can also be attributed to the intentional implementation of Character Counts and Positive Action, two na-

tionally recognized character education curriculums. Character Counts teaches and reinforces the six pillars of character/ethical values. Students are recognized daily and weekly for demonstrating good character through a school-wide initiative called "Caught Being Good."

Positive Action works by teaching and reinforcing the intuitive philosophy that we feel good about ourselves when we do positive actions and there is a positive way to do everything. The program teaches the positive actions for the physical, intellectual, social, and emotional areas of Catalyst scholars.

CATALYST AND THE LASALLIAN CHARISM

Catalyst is a concrete manifestation of the Lasallian charism today; it is a response to the urgent needs today,

especially the poor, in creative fidelity to our charism. Catalyst is an echo of what the Founder did. This was De La Salle's response: that no one should be left out, that no one should be excluded. De La Salle's response was an echo of what Jesus preached: all are welcome.

Those who outright dismiss charter schools in the Catholic world, even in our Lasallian world, because we cannot call them Catholic schools fall into the trap of dismissing this on principle rather than on seizing an opportunity to respond to the urgent needs of the poor. "Our church and congregation simply do not get it right when we outright exclude sectors of people, especially the poor, based on principle," explained Bro. Ed. "The most important question is not whether or not one of our ministries is Catholic in name; rather, the most important question is how a ministry responds in creative fidelity to the charism relative to the urgent needs of our day, especially the needs of the poor."

The Orientation Manual for Teachers and Staff at Catalyst contains all the principles of Lasallian education, including the writings of De La Salle, and numerous supplemental resources that are grounded in the 12 Virtues of a Good Teacher, in one-page reflections that are taken directly from *The Conduct of Schools*, from *The Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, and more. The values of community, relationship, rigor, respect, results, and hope, along with the six pillars of character are infused throughout the Catalyst mission as a means of articulating the Lasallian charism and Gospel values.

When selecting teachers, Catalyst follows the same approach as San



Catalyst students danced their way to a citywide ballroom championship and performed as part of Ravinia and the Chicago Children's Choir.

Miguel. “We look for people who are on a mission, who have a special calling, who have fire in the gut and who wish to change the world by being agents of change in the lives of these students and communities,” stated Bro. Ed.

SUCCESS INDICATORS

When asked if the school was a safe place, the responses from students indicate that Catalyst is achieving its objectives:

- No one threatens me or picks on me.
- There are no bullies.
- The teachers don't pick on you for what you don't know but keep encouraging us.
- There is no violence.
- We get a chance to be good and then another chance and another chance.
- It feels calm here.
- The teachers and aides are here for us.
- No one puts you down for your goals but they encourage us to aim high.

Similarly, the responses of parents who participated in a focus group indicate that Catalyst is accomplishing its mission:

- The staff cares.
- Everyone has high expectations for kids.
- Learning is expected.
- This school feels like a part of my family.
- My child is so excited about school that she never wants to miss a day.
- Every student is assessed and kids always work at their level.

- Teachers always tell you what is good—we get regular emails and phone calls.
- Teachers are invested in our children's welfare.
- Children have multiple opportunities to re-enter the community.
- Character development is important and even show up outside of the school.

The children of Howland have turned a significant corner. They exercise significantly more self control, smile and greet people. They are more respectful to their teachers and other adults, and have made academic progress in the midst of confusion, discord. In 2010, Catalyst-Howland ranked fourth-highest in ISAT gains of all 91 contract and charter schools in Chicago.

In its first year Catalyst-Circle Rock was demonstrating an average academic growth of 1.9 years. This means these children were in the 99th percentile for growth nationally. Circle Rock showed a 10 percent increase in one year on ISAT tests.

Circle Rock and Howland were both selected to participate in the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP). The professional development, incentive pay, and training of mentors have lifted up both schools and positioned them for even greater achievement.

MOVING FORWARD

It took the San Miguel Network a good 10 years to hone its programmatic and administrative structure. The Catalyst Schools Network is moving much more quickly because San Miguel paved the way. Catalyst is now a pioneer in the public school system. There are many elementary charter schools, but none

has the motivation or intentionality about character, values, and bringing the religious context to the world of public education as Catalyst does.

In December 2011, the Chicago Board of Education approved the application of the leaders of Maria High School and the Catalyst Schools Network to open Catalyst-Maria, a K-12 charter school in Maria's Chicago Lawn campus. “This is another opportunity for Catalyst to claim its original vision as a public school in the Lasallian/faith-based tradition,” remarked Bro. Ed. “This is Catalyst's niche in the Chicago charter community. It is the lens through which we have asserted our identity and through which we have determined is the way we should grow.”

The success of this relationship may inspire other Catholic schools to consider engaging the public sector in ways previously unimagined, and Catalyst will be at the forefront of that opportunity. ■

“At Catalyst, we believe in educating the whole child. We focus on academics, social skills, self-esteem, citizenship—on all those things that allow students to grow up to be positive and successful members of their communities.”—Bro. Michael Fehrenbach, Director of Mission Effectiveness, Catalyst Schools Network