

Excellence for All:

How a Guiding Principle Translates to Action at Our Lady of Hungary

How can Catholic schools provide an academic and spiritual education that meets the needs of a diverse student body? How can we ensure that every student in our school has what he or she needs to grow and thrive, even as the population of our school shifts dramatically over time? At Our Lady of Hungary, we have joined together in committing to “excellence for all,” a guiding principle that keeps us focused on helping every student succeed, regardless of family background, language skills or income level.

Like many Catholic schools, demographic shifts in our parish have had a transformative impact on our student body. The faces of our community have changed dramatically over a very small period of time. As recently as four years ago, our students were predominantly Anglo-American. Today, more than 90 percent of our K-8 students identify as Hispanic—many of whom come from rural Mexico—and 40 percent receive English Language Learner (ELL) services. One hundred percent of our students qualify for free or reduced cost lunch. As Rick Pendergast notes in the fall 2015 issue of *Momentum* (“The Hispanic Conundrum”), Catholic schools tend to ignore the Hispanic community in their attendance areas, often because they worry about Hispanic students’ English language proficiency, need for remedial instruction and ability to afford tuition. They do so despite the tremendous potential in those communities and, even more surprisingly, despite declining enrollments at many Catholic schools.

Our community has instead fully embraced the new additions to our student body and the call to help every one of our students succeed, regardless of their language or socio-economic background. “Excellence



for all” reinforces for us, every day, the important notion that each student can learn, grow and excel when given the right kinds of support.

To realize our visions for student achievement and growth, we have had to find better ways to precisely identify individual students’ learning needs and to respond to those needs with the most effective





instructional practices. To this end, we have placed significant emphasis on formative and interim assessment strategies and the training needed to use these strategies and tools effectively.

This past fall, for example, we carefully analyzed our students' MAP scores—which are available immediately after the students complete the assessment—to determine priority areas that we needed to address at the institutional level. As a result of this analysis, we implemented two major student learning-centered initiatives. The first initiative was an after-school tutoring program for ELL students and students in our lowest-achieving classes. Tutoring provided them immediately with the additional support they needed to accelerate their learning. The second was a summer learning program for low-achieving students, which provides remedial support and mitigates summer learning loss.

We also took a close look at our professional development offerings. While we have always prioritized professional learning, a series of classroom observations and MAP score analysis at the classroom level indicated that we needed to do more. We observed highly variable student learning growth across classrooms, which seemed to indicate that some teachers were comfortable and effective using assessment tools and data to inform their instructional approaches, while others struggled to do the same.

We used these findings as a catalyst for improving our collective understanding about what interim assessment data were telling us about student needs. We used formative assessment more effectively to monitor learning and tailor instruction to support those needs. To do this, we called for our teachers to re-engage with their professional learning community (PLC) practice with a focus on improving their skills with formative assessment. We provided the framework for the types of change we hoped to see, and then empowered master teachers—leaders with expertise in using formative assessment—and created dedicated time to work with their colleagues to share their skills and knowledge.

As a result of this focused teacher-led professional development work, our teachers have become more confident and adept at using formative assessments and assessment data to help accelerate their students' learning. As one of our fourth- and fifth-grade teachers pointed out, all the data we collect matters very little

if we do not know how to act on it. For her, the PLC focus on formative assessment skills gave her the capacity to help each of her students, regardless of whether they were low-, average- or high-achieving.

Our next round of interim assessment scores reflected our teachers' improved practice. The spring MAP scores showed learning growth in each of our classrooms, and every class improved its mean score in all three areas. In four classrooms, the scores were above the MAP norms for reading and language usage. Moreover, thanks to both the instructional initiatives and the teacher professional development changes, we have seen a tremendous upward shift in the school's energy. Our students, teachers and parents feel more empowered and they are proud of the progress we are making.

For us, as school leaders, this progress has shown us the way forward. Following on the success of our focused assessment-related efforts, we have identified a number of key approaches to build on that success. These include maintaining our focus on formative assessment professional development, hiring a dedicated ELL teacher, assigning mentor teachers to guide new teachers and provide ongoing support to teachers who need it, and setting aside more time for teacher collaboration.

Perhaps the most important outcome, though, has been the way our strategic shifts have reaffirmed—for us, for our teachers, for our students and families—that we are capable of living up to our guiding principle of “excellence for all,” and of furthering our mission to provide every student with the scholastic and spiritual foundation they need to be successful now and later in life, regardless of where our students come from, what language they speak, or their socioeconomic status.

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