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2008 Best Practices Award

June 26, 2008

Acceptance Remarks at the annual meeting on receiving award for Best Practices
 Dr. Mary C. McDonald, Secretary of Education/Superintendent, Diocese of Memphis



On behalf of the leadership and management, at all levels of our Catholic schools, and Catholic Schools Office, I thank you for this very great honor you bestow upon us. On behalf of those who work in this Church ministry, I express our gratitude for the work of the Leadership Roundtable in promoting the best practices in leadership and management. It is those practices that will lift our Church and position it to continue to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ in ways that promote a culture of participation and accountability. Your Standards for Excellence leads the way for all who are involved in ministry in our Church. You are the change that will change us for the better. I thank Bishop Steib, who, in 1998, appointed me Superintendent of Catholic Schools. His vision, and trust in me, paved the way for us to reclaim the great heritage of Catholic education in our Diocese. His invitation to me was one of partnership. He gave me the freedom to be a risk-taker, to create a new paradigm for Catholic schools and to reinvent the way we do business. My responsibility was not only to address the educational challenges we faced, and garner financial support, but also to change the culture of Catholic schools and the Catholic Schools Office. I believe that Bishop Steib recognized that I am Memphis on the outside, and Philadelphia on the inside and didn't mistake niceness for weakness. Thank you, Bishop, for taking a risk on me, and if ever you do get gray hair, I'll take the blame for every one of them.

In 1998 the Catholic schools in the Diocese of Memphis mirrored the situation of dioceses all across the country. We had 16 schools, and 5 of them in the urban area were failing and about a year away from closing. There was a need for more schools in the suburban areas where the Catholic population had shifted, but we had no money to build them. And, sadly, all of our inner-city schools had closed. The Catholic Schools Office had functioned since it's inception in a caretaker mode with no plan for the future in place. The road to the demise of Catholic schools was being paved with begin neglect. Like many organizations, turf wars were waged at all levels and departments of operations from silos of self protection. The problems were systemic. If there was to be any hope of a turn-around for our Catholic schools, then the Catholic Schools Office needed systemic change. It needed to be united with all schools and diocesan departments, to become a support for the schools, to be proactive in positioning them for success. It needed to be led from that caretaker stage, through an entrepreneurial phase and on into a professional management system able to support and grow a school system that implements the mission of the church to lift up, educationally, socially, and spiritually, all God's children through the great gift of Catholic education. But Catholic education had become devalued; it had taken a downturn in a soft educational market.

At this same time there were in Memphis, a small but committed group of non-Catholic leaders who refused to stand by while a failing city school system graduated an undereducated workforce. They had the resources to intervene but wanted to be as strategic in this investment in education as they were in their businesses. They wanted to make a difference. They were not donors; they were investors, venture philanthropists. They looked at the Catholic schools, and the empty school buildings, as resources that with an infusion of capital and strong leadership could become beacons of hope in the neighborhoods of burnt-out buildings and crack houses, overrun with gangs, drugs, prostitution, and violence. These investors were convinced that faith-based schools would make the difference that the city, and the children and families living in poverty in these neighborhoods, needed. And nobody does faith-based schools like the Catholics.

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It was by the grace of God that we came together at a meeting in my office, so that together we could be agents for change for the children living in poverty in our city. The partnership we forged was the tipping point in reclaiming the heritage of Catholic education. Our first goal was to reopen our inner-city Catholic schools, schools that had been closed from 8 to more than 50 years.

So in July 1999 we began the Jubilee Schools with one school, one Kindergarten class and 26 students. The systemic change began in these schools, as well the Catholic Schools Office. Each of the eight Jubilee schools reopened one grade at a time, and added a grade a year so that students and parents would learn what a Catholic school is, and what was expected of them. A scholarship trust was established that ensured the scholarships would follow the students from pre-school through twelfth grade in a Catholic school. Every family is expected to pay something towards the tuition of their child according to their ability to do so. We learned early on that our Jubilee schools had to meet the basic needs of the families we serve, as well as educate the children. Hunger was one of the first issues we tackled. We started our food program, serving two full meals a day and sending the children home with backpacks of non-perishable food each Friday so that they would have something to eat on the week-ends. We started literacy classes and job training and placement for the parents and guardians who were considered unemployable. We partnered with a multitude of businesses, institutions, and organizations to assist in every aspect of this effort from health care to tutoring to supplying uniforms and needed clothing for school. Our entrepreneurial phase had begun and our inner-city schools became centers of learning for the community, reclaiming the neighborhoods, and the hopes and dreams of the children and families in poverty.

Key to the success of this total educational effort was the ability of the Catholic Schools Office to provide the educational delivery system, and to ensure the health of all the components of that system. In order to support this growth, the Catholic Schools Office itself needed systemic change. It needed to move into a professional management system, with a culture of accountability, good stewardship of finances and talent, succession planning, leadership development, and to implement a structure of management by teams. We needed to unite ministry and business, leadership and management, vision and focus, in order to ensure the growth of this new paradigm for Catholic schools. We needed to guarantee to our investors that our Catholic schools will continue to be beacons of hope that educate all God's children, those in poverty and those of a new immigrant population. I believe that it is Catholic education that will lift our country, and our Church. Although many thought this task impossible, we knew that with God, all things are possible.

But the Jubilee Schools do not operate in a vacuum. They are part of the seamless garment of Catholic education in our diocese. We are one body and we work to promote mutual support and concern. At the same time that we were reopening the inner-city schools, our failing schools in the outer city were restructured, and assisted with implementing sound practices in stewardship, and all areas of the educational practices. With these schools we started our Urban Initiative Schools. Additionally, the educational needs of the growing Catholic population in the suburbs were addressed with three new elementary schools and a high school built for 1,000 students. During those six entrepreneurial years we collaborated, communicated and established new partnerships and procedures for the way we did business. We took a three pronged approach to addressing the educational need in the inner-city, outer-city, and suburbs to address the specific needs of each area. We spread the good news of Catholic education! Several grassroots efforts of support began, as well as support from Foundations and the business community. The gifts and talents of a broad base of support are valued, appreciated and affirmed.

During the past three years the Catholic Schools Office has moved into the professional management stage that solidifies the systemic change we sought. We started the Leadership Institute, the Mentor program, The Facilities Maintenance and Consolidated Purchasing program, the Professional Development and Performance Program, the Teacher Recruitment and Retention program, the Finance and Budgeting Practices, our Leadership Teams, and a multitude of ancillary efforts to ensure continuous improvement of the schools as well as the Catholic Schools Office. Through broad-based collaboration we developed our Mission statement, and our ten belief statements. Together we developed and implemented our 7 standards of excellence for all schools, including 2 for Catholic identity. And all of our schools were accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. In October, 2007, the Catholic Schools Office was accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools as a School District, one of only two dioceses in the country to receive this status. This holds the Catholic Schools Office to a higher standard of accountability. We have gone from 16 schools ten years ago, to 29 schools today, and our highest student enrollment since 1976. The change was systemic and the growth supported. The change is no longer change, but a part of who we are now. And, with our leadership training program, we are ensuring through succession planning, a culture of continuous improvement, accountability and participation by all. Now you know why we refer to the past ten years as our 'Miracle in Memphis'. The credit, honor and glory for this belong to God!

Thank you for recognizing that the work we do is worthwhile and that our Catholic school system is astute in the ways of good management practices as well as in the ministry of education. Know that you and the work of the Leadership Roundtable are always in my prayers, and the prayers of the children in our Catholic schools. Thank you and God bless you!

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