

# Collaboration: The Future of Academic Excellence in Boston Catholic Schools

**October 21, 2010** – The Catholic Schools Office, in conjunction with the Barbara and Patrick Roche Center for Catholic Education, invited secondary school leaders to participate in a professional development seminar at Boston College’s School of Theology and Ministry. The session, which encouraged collaboration and discussion of Academic Excellence in Catholic schools, opened with a prayer from Brother Thomas Puccio, CFX, principal of Malden Catholic High School.



Dr. Mary Grassa O’Neill, Superintendent of Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Boston, called for collaborative efforts to advance academic excellence. In keeping with themes of the day, she advocated for stronger communication between schools to not only foster Catholic education’s traditional strengths but also supplement areas of weakness. Representatives from the Catholic Schools Office, the Roche Center, and Boston College alike heralded the benefits of

open dialogue between elementary schools, secondary schools, and institutions of higher education. Citing specifically the endless possibilities for advancement represented by the brand new Lynch Academy and Roche Center for Catholic Education, Dr. O’Neill remarked that “we [*the CSO and its schools in the Archdiocese*] are blessed to be working with Boston College.”

Father Joe O’Keefe, S.J., Dean of the Boston College Lynch School of Education, welcomed attendees and quickly canvassed the dramatically changing relationship between Boston College and local Catholic schools. Part of the Light the World Campaign, a fundraising effort through which BC hopes to raise \$1.5 billion, both the Roche Center and the Lynch Institute were recently established for the express purpose of offering support to Boston Catholic schools. While the Lynch Academy will focus on “immigrant, poor, and tough neighborhoods” through sponsorship of early-career urban principal training, the Roche Center will offer a broader range of school development resources.



Dr. O’Keefe also compared modern notions of academic excellence with its traditional significance in Catholic education. His “excellence of the whole person”—an excellence defined in Catholic high schools—is often at odds with today’s emphasis on “data-based everything.” Dean O’Keefe suggested that the excellence of a college preparatory program may be more accurately measured in the number of successful college graduates, rather than in matriculation statistics alone. Participants overwhelmingly supported this “longitudinal approach” to understanding academic excellence, with many demonstrating interest in instituting a post-graduate tracking program within their own schools.



Dr. Patricia Weitzel-O’Neill, former Superintendent of Schools in the Archdiocese of Washington D.C., introduced herself and her role at the head of the Roche Center as resources that will allow school leaders to address old problems in new, creative ways. Dr. Weitzel-O’Neill stressed the importance of marketing the successes of Catholic schools on both local and national levels. The “practical research,” conferences, workshops, and seminars offered under the umbrella of Roche Center services will be designed explicitly for classroom adaptation. Sensitive to the needs and wants of schools, Dr. Weitzel-O’Neill advertised a flexible Roche agenda and ears open to feedback. With this in mind, the seminar opened into its interactive and collaborative segment.



Breaking into small groups, attendees identified their schools’ greatest examples of academic excellence and most worrisome stumbling blocks with recommendations for the programs that might fortify or ameliorate them. In her swift analysis of survey responses, Dr. Weitzel-O’Neill was able to not only identify key problem areas but also illustrate how perspective gained from scholastic collaboration could strengthen such weaknesses. It should be noted that nearly every school identified their own unique culture and mission as sources of academic excellence.

The seminar was the first in a series of three. It complements the CHEC Conference on Academic Excellence held earlier this fall at Boston College with collaboration from Fordham University.

For more information on the Barbara and Patrick Roche Center for Catholic Education, please visit <http://www.bc.edu/schools/lsoe/cce/>.

*By Christina Sorgi, Catholic Schools Office*