GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING AND USING CSIS DATA

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Catholic School Improvement Surveys: Guide to Understanding and Using Data

"Focus on what matters. Make your customers happy with your product as quickly as you can, and help them as much as you can after that. If you do those better than anyone else out there you'll win." ~ Marc Hedlund

The Catholic School Improvement Surveys were designed by the Excellence with Integrity Institute to provide each school and entire Archdiocesan/Diocesan systems with essential data around the following key areas:

Parent Survey:

- Overall Satisfacion, Instructional Quality, Religious Formation, Constituent Relations, Operational Excellence, Financial Health

Elementary/High School Graduating Students Survey:

- Overall Satisfaction and Further Education Plans, Faith Formation, College & Career Competencies, School Culture & Support

Students & Staff Survey:

- Quality of Academic Learning & Instruction, Character Development, School Culture & Support, Professional Community, Partnership with Parents

Student Experience:

- Developing Academic, Social, and Character Competencies; Safe, Supportive, and Engaging Learning Environment; Faith Formation and Spiritual Resilience.

The Catholic School Improvement Surveys are intended not as a one-time event, but rather as an organizational habit of continuous improvement. In essence, it is a dialogue with parents, students, staff, and alumni/alumnae seeking insight into their perceptions of strengths and areas for improvement.

Educator Thomas Lickona talks about the importance of "*practicing what we preach, and preaching what we practice.*" The Catholic School Improvement Surveys model the values of respect, integrity, innovation, excellence, collaboration, and enthusiasm. Stakeholders will have a chance to experience these values as their feedback is gathered and continuous improvement innovations are implemented. But since some may not immediately see the deeper rationale for the practice, it is essential to explain why we do it, and how the data will be used to market and differentiate each school's strengths and to focus on areas for continuous improvement. This is the chance to "preach *why we do* this practice".

A Tool for Improvement

As the title suggests, the Catholic School Improvement Surveys are all about *improvement*! No school is going to be perfect. It's as simple as that. Many times schools fear gathering data because in the past it may have been used as a weapon against them. They worry about what their stakeholders might say. However, whereas the best organizations aren't necessarily perfect, they are responsive. The Catholic School Improvement Surveys help create a process for engaging in a dialogue with the stakeholders. The views parents, graduating students, and alumni/alumnae share—good, bad, or ugly—allow for vital insights into creating more satisfied "customers."

The most important part of the process is the recognition that stakeholders have been heard and their input fully considered. Many of the things that emerge tend to be easily-fixed, "small-ticket" issues. When stakeholders are heard, and when they see responsiveness to their feedback, the mission and values of the Catholic schools are reinforced.

Stakeholder feedback will reveal some issues where the proper course of action in response to the feedback isn't clear or simple, especially where stakeholders hold differing views (e.g., some say they want more of this, others say they want less). Regardless, most stakeholders value the opportunity for input and evidence of responsiveness. When they know their feedback is taken seriously, stakeholders become highly satisfied "raving fans" who support their schools and recruit others.

Forget Perfect. Find Optimal.

Fear of data is sometimes rooted in an unrealistic hope for perfection. At the Institute we argue for a *forget perfect, find optimal* approach. Instead of one-size-fits-all definition of perfect, optimal refers to a balance of excellence and efficiency amid real-world circumstances with diverse stakeholders. Feedback from the perceptions of stakeholders is collected on a 5-point "optimal performance" scale, and the results are grouped into ranges that help identify *opportunities* for creating or enhancing a healthy, thriving culture of excellence rooted in real life circumstances.

The Summary Reports present the results in three colors:

- **Areas of Concern**: where commitment to more intensive effort and focus on improvement is needed — red,

- **Areas of Opportunity**: where good things are happening, but where more focus and attention could quickly pay significant dividends — yellow, and

- **Areas of Optimal or Approaching Optimal**: where schools must make sure they stay the course on what they have been doing — green.

Similar to your annual physical, your annual Catholic School Improvement data are designed to promote thriving health, rather than just identify life-threatening problems. A healthy school community has many dimensions that are interrelated. The *Green*, *Yellow*, *Red* presentation of data isn't meant to separate what schools do into areas that need focus and areas that can be ignored. Your plan of action will most likely need to include 1) ways to **maintain** Green items, 2) ways to **focus** on clusters of Yellow items that have similarities and could be improved together, and 3) if needed, steps to gather more information, reflect, and plan ways to **address** the Red items. It would certainly be a mistake to over-respond to any one item without putting it into the larger context.

Making Sense—and Use—of Your Data

Getting the results from your Catholic School Improvement Surveys is the beginning of the process, not the end. In the Making Sense of the Data Guide, we have provided a basic template for your data review and reflection process.

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MAKING SENSE OF THE DATA GUIDE

1. What story does the data tell us overall?

    a) What are the general trends in the data?
- » Which scales/items are optimal or approaching optimal (green zone)?
- » Which scales/items indicate areas of opportunity (yellow zone)?
- » Which scales/items indicate areas of concern (red zone)?

2. What can we celebrate?

    a) What accomplishments, areas of strength, or assets does the data reveal?
- » Review the optimal scores: How do we make sure we maintain our strengths? How can we build on them to enhance our other improvement efforts?

3. What improvement needs can we focus on?

    a) What areas of opportunity emerge from the data?
- » Review the scales and items with scores in the yellow zone: Are we missing out on opportunities for growth?

    b) What areas of concern emerge from the data?
- » Review the scales and items with scores in the red zone: How can we intensify our efforts to improve these?

4. What does the data not tell us?

    a) What other information is needed? How can we get it?

Adapted from Lickona & Davidson (2005)

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Without a process such as this, what often happens is a quick rush to judgement: "Did we pass or fail? Did we look good or bad?" This kind of response to data is com-

mon, but often not helpful. Following this process ensures that the data are used as a tool for improvement, not a weapon for harm.

What story does the data tell us overall?

The data presented must be understood as both quantitative and qualitative data. The numbers help to tell a story quickly, but they need to be considered together with stakeholders' feedback on open-ended questions to understand the deeper issues and relations between them. Together, the quantitative and qualitative information should be drawn out into larger themes that would guide communication and planning. For example, "Most of our parents are satisfied with X, Y, and Z. However, two issues are causing problems….", or "Communication in general is good, but it could be better around…".

What can we celebrate?

We often fixate on a low item or a negative comment, while missing out on the many things to celebrate. Did you know, "90% of stakeholders feel positive about… and 75% said….."? Communicating findings like this reinforces to the entire community the good things, and reminds stakeholders that the data collected are really put to use, increasing the likelihood that they participate in the future. Celebrating positive findings shouldn't be a one-time thing, instead the results can be used throughout the year.

What improvement needs can we focus on?

When we're worried about being perfect, we forget that feedback from stakeholders about what needs improving gives us a chance to show them we respect them, value their opinion, and are always striving to improve. Improvement goals can be organized into themes to prevent trying to do too much: "Next year we will focus on three things: Improved Communication, Facilities Fixes, and Catholic Identity." Knowing improvement needs also provides excellent support for seeking outside assistance ("These data show why we need a grant for technology, or a donation for facilities, or additional professional development for our teachers specifically around…").

What does the data not tell us?

CSIS data can tell us a lot, but not everything. Looking for deeper understanding of an issue allows for an additional chance to engage stakeholders. Maybe it's a focused survey, or a focus group, or even a new committee. But the process of gathering more data ensures clarity about what we can do better or differently, AND continues to engage the stakeholders. (e.g., "50% of stakeholders said ___. What exactly is contributing to this? Is there any other existing data that we can access, or gather, to confirm or clarify this emerging issue?").

Review Steps

First, we study the data reports looking for specific insights. Data review begins by looking at the SUMMARY for trends and patterns, and then verifying them by reviewing additional detail in the TABLES and in COMMENTS.

From the Summary reports evidence is gathered about questions like:

    a. Are the stakeholder perceptions positive or negative?

    b. Are the stakeholders aligned in their perceptions?

    c. Are there strengths within one area?

    d. Is there balance (or imbalance) between areas?

    e. Is there solidarity or division between stakeholder groups (students vs staff vs parents)?

From the Tables we then look to see:

    f. Is there consistency of perspective by considering how tight or spread the frequencies are (or by the size of the standard deviation of the means)?

    g. Are the responses consistent for all items or are there some items that show greater degree of diverse perceptions?

From the Comments we then look to see:

    h. Are there specifics in the comments that may help to explain an overall trend?

    i. Are there specific experiences or school practices that are contributing to the developing culture or causing distress?

If the school has results from different surveys, the above steps would be followed for each one.

(The next section presents some additional tools that could help in reviewing and summarizing data results.)

The *second* major step is to integrate and interpret the various results in order to determine the overall school culture trajectory and next steps for its development.

The process of thorough review of the Catholic School Improvement Surveys results helps to benchmark the school's culture trajectory to assess whether it is on an upward or downward trend, see the visual on the next page. A downward trend, clearly, represents a situation when school culture has become unbalanced or ineffective, and therefore presents an acute risk. To distinguish between a school that hit

a temporary tough patch and one that is on a downward spiral, longitudinal data is typically necessary.

Additional Tools for Determining What to Do Better or Differently

Having reviewed the Data Report, eventually most schools get to a place where they need to drill down further into an issue and/or their response. What follows are several tools that help guide this process.

The *Start/Stop/Continue/Improve (Organizational Effectiveness Audit)* Tool is a popular one. Once the data have been discussed and areas for improvement have been identified, then the question is "Based on what we have found, what should we start, stop, continue or improve?" This tool drives the conversation from WHAT [the data say…] to the NOW WHAT [can we do better or differently?]. Thinking through things to stop is often as important as things to add. Similarly, continuing or improving things that are working is vital for making the most of resources.

The point of this audit is to avoid adding an unreasonable number of new things to try and take on. The audit must be connected to the key themes coming from the data. So, not a random list of good things to consider, but a specific set of things that will reinforce identified strengths and address identified areas for improvement.

School Culture Assessment SWOT is an alternative tool that can be used to identify and categorize the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats in the school culture.

The *Drivers and Preventers Audit* Tool is another continuous improvement tool for taking the data from the WHAT to the NOW WHAT.

Once an area for improvement has been identified, this tool provides a framework for brainstorming the DRIVERS (strengths, assets, positive things that are working, things to build on) and PREVENTERS (things that are holding us back, causing problem, detracting from core mission). This is a great way for engaging stakeholders around the data: "Communication was something that you said we should improve, tonight we want to brainstorm what we believe are the drivers and preventers of effective communication."

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SCHOOL CULTURE AUDIT

↑ **START** New practices: that may help address a new situation or factors that did not exist before, or new ideas that the team may want to try to improve effectiveness and/or efficiency

✕ **STOP** Practices that:
- are not having the desired outcome
- may have proved impractical or inefficient
- are distracting from core mission or overall effectiveness

✓ **CONTINUE** Practices that:
- are having the desired outcome
- are efficient and effective

↻ **IMPROVE** Practices that:
- are having some of the desired outcome, show promise
- but need to be more efficient or effective

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SCHOOL CULTURE ASSESSMENT SWOT

School:

STRENGTHS List school strengths, points of pride and praise:

WEAKNESSES List school weaknesses, limitations, and areas in need of improvement:

OPPORTUNITIES List specific actions, activities, and initiatives that would build school strengths and reduce its limitations:

THREATS List specific situations, circumstances, or influences that threaten school mission and goals by compromising its strengths or exploiting its weaknesses:

DRIVERS & PREVENTERS AUDIT

Step 1. Brainstorm and list habits, practices, or assets that:

👍 ***DRIVE****, or contribute to*

👎 ***PREVENT****, or detract from*

Step 2. ***PRIORITIZE:*** **identify three most important drivers and three most important preventers listed above; discuss strategies to reduce the negative impact of preventers and enhance the effect of drivers.**

Striving for Synergy

One question that frequently comes up is "Who should be involved in the sense making process?" Not every stakeholder needs to be (or likely can be) engaged directly in the sense making and action planning processes. What we often talk about is "synergy, not democracy." Most stakeholders don't want or need to be in the brainstorming or to vote on the course of action. Most are grateful to simply be aware that it is happening, and to be clear about what changes will be made. So, with each step in the process identifying the right leadership group is important. And then communicating the process and outcomes is essential. For example, sharing out with parents that "A focus group of parents gathered to discuss things we can start, stop, continue or improve. They identified and prioritized the following 5 essential things, which we'll be working on in the coming months."

Here's an example of how one Catholic School approaches the use of their data: their School Advisory Commission (i.e., school board) uses their improvement data as part of their annual retreat. They take a morning session to work through the data using the Making Sense of the Data Guide. After working directly with the data, they create an overall plan of action using the START, STOP, CONTINUE/IMPROVE Audit. They then apply the Drivers/Preventers template to further brainstorm particular issues (e.g., drivers and preventers of our approach to Catholic Identity or to our school fundraising/development). This moves them from the WHAT (here are some strengths and areas of improvement) to the NOW WHAT (what will we do better or differently next year). In September, at their Back To School Night, they share a simple summary of the strengths and areas for improvement. Throughout the year in parent newsletters and at other school gatherings, they continue to refer to the feedback and connect it to ongoing changes and improvements they are making based on the analysis of the feedback.

Conclusion

The old adage says, "Nothing will work, unless you do." The Catholic School Improvement Surveys are tools for continuous improvement. The more you work with the data and use it to identify areas to celebrate and improve upon, the more you will get from it. In particular it is the process of engaging stakeholders through data gathering and data review that often yields the most value. When done right, the process truly models the catholic schools' mission, vision, and values of respect, integrity, innovation, excellence, collaboration, and enthusiasm.

"CSI Surveys provide our Pastor, President, and me as Principal the vital data on important areas of safety, well-being and Catholic Identity, as well as insights about the culture of excellence in teaching and learning in our school. They have contributed to many simple, yet important changes for our stakeholders, as well as guided our plans for more significant improvements to continue our recruitment and retention success."

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