Long Island Catholic Elementary Schools Guide

COVER STORY: THE POWER OF HOPE AND ITS ROLE IN CATHOLIC EDUCATION
The Secret We Should Not Keep:
The Power of Hope and Its Role in Catholic School Education

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In the Seinfeld reruns that so many of us now thrill to as vintage television, George Costanza is often tormented by Jerry Seinfeld for the harm that he causes in sharing any and all secrets that were supposedly in the vault. Despite the value of keeping some information in confidence, there are some secrets, which need to be shared with all. The secret that should be shared with all in this age preoccupied with assessment and higher standards is that the creation of hope should be the central mission of our schools, and imparting knowledge should be a byproduct of that mission.

Imparting knowledge should never be made the sole mission of a school. Sadly, for far too many schools today, imparting information has become the sole measuring stick of school effectiveness. In an age in which unparalleled numbers of parents are opting out of Common Core testing, it seems that many public schools have become their test scores. The anger of these parents in open rebellion with this test score mania is driven by an intuitive belief that the higher standards and lower tests scores have the power to destroy their children's self-worth and crush their dreams. Research would indicate that their intuition is correct. Catholic schools, and some courageous public schools and teachers in open rebellion with the current assessment culture, have known for a long time that the mission of a school should be to create hope.

The hope that I speak of is not a wishful or volitional thinking, but a measurable, researched psychological construct. The claim that Catholic schools have the power to build and create hope is not one that is being tossed out lightly or semantically, but one based on over six years of research and observation on the subject of hope in Catholic school education. Shane Lopez in his book, Making Hope Happen, proposed that man is the only animal that can imagine a future, and in simplest terms, he defined the idea of hope as your belief that you can positively shape that future to achieve your goals and live out your dreams (Lopez, 2013a).

The scientific foundation of that construct was much earlier conceived and researched by C. R. Snyder of the University of Kansas (Sny-
Hope consists of the measurement of your will to achieve a goal, coupled with your knowledge of the ways to achieve that goal. Truly compelling and life changing research on the power of hope is emerging that reveals why parents should care more about hope than test scores.

Students at the De La Salle School succeed because their teachers and their peers demand, rather than request, that they succeed. Being part of a community that supports and celebrates your goals, and helps you achieve them, is a powerful motivator. This concept of “creating hope and building self-esteem” is embraced by every Long Island Catholic Elementary School, and helps each student develop his or her full potential.

In his research with the Gallop Poll, Shane Lopez reveals that your hope score is a better predictor of college completion than your SAT, your ACT, and even your high school GPA. You are four times more likely to fail to complete college with low hope than with low ability (Lopez, 2013b). The idea of hope is so powerfully linked with success that Snyder referred to it as a rainbow in the mind (Snyder, 2002). My research has revealed the power of Catholic schools to create hope, especially for minority children, but for all children. In an age in which standards and assessments seem to drive every conversation about education, consider whether you have ever heard the idea that Catholic schools create hope. If you have not heard this statement then my contention that this is a well-kept secret might be all too true.

What you need to know about hope is that it is not something static that you are born with or without, but hope is a way of thinking. Changing your way of thinking will change your level of hope. What this suggests is that the most powerful role of school should be to build hope in its students, no matter what their test scores. The idea that our levels of hope can float up and down also reveals the extraordinary influence of others in our lives to shape the self-defining conversations in our heads. This construct of hope as an outgrowth of our self-belief legitimately poses the question of whether a school can create hope in its students.

For the last six years, I have researched, mentored and, yes, even cherished, students from the De La Salle School in Freeport. The De La Salle School is another secret that we should not keep. De La Salle is a small Catholic school serving young men from fifth to eighth grade, near or below the poverty line, from Freeport and the underserved communities that surround Freeport. Despite poverty and challenged neighborhoods, this school’s students go on to achieve an almost perfect high school graduation rate with nearly every student going on to and succeeding in college. We read a good deal about the dismal statistics of children of poverty and the impossibility of these students overcoming their challenging situations, but this school defies the odds with graduation rates and college acceptance rates that would rival more affluent middle class school districts on Long Island. I bet you have not read about this secret in any of the many articles published on the continuing lack of success in educating minority students from challenged communities.

After quantitatively and qualitatively researching the reasons behind the success of these students in the face of such daunting odds, I shared with the school’s founding director, Brother Thomas, qualitative research on the boys’ stories revealed to me that the school had created hope in the children’s lives. My involvement in setting up a mentoring program for the graduates of De La Salle at Holy Trinity High School further revealed that this hope propels them long after their graduation from De La Salle in the eighth grade. The secret that you should now be anxious to discover is how a school can build hope.

The research of Albert Bandura on self-efficacy and the research on hope reveal to us that hope can be created by several factors (Bandura, 1994). The factor that most increases your hope is success. Sometimes, the boys reported, Catholic schools like the De La Salle School demand rather than request that you be successful. Secondly, the power of others, persuaders, people who surround you, insisting that you can do it, is a driving force in positively shaping the conversation in your head at this school. This conversation in your head, when shaped by the positive talk of teachers and volunteers, builds the foundation of your will.

Hope can also strongly be shaped by the role of vicarious others, people just like you, who are achieving the same goals to which you aspire. De La Salle boys are physically surrounded by the success stories and presence of the students who have preceded them. Finally, being part of a community that supports and celebrates your goals is a powerful hope creator. These are secrets that emerged from my research on the success of the De La Salle School in overcoming the demonizing burdens of poverty and struggling neighborhoods, but they are also the secrets of all Catholic schools that share these same values and embrace the creation of hope as their mission.

If you want to gain a perspective on failing schools, simply reverse these characteristics. The lives of students in failing schools are often characterized by failure with their lives dominated by others who take form of hope crushers, people who tell you that you will never be able to do it. It turns out that other people in your life are more pivotal than you might have guessed.

Others in your life, either help you overcome setbacks and failure, or play a role in convincing you that you will never overcome the obstacles you face. It turns out failing well, persevering in the face of setbacks, is the key skill that we all need to master to be successful. In his groundbreaking article, Who Gets to Graduate, Paul Tough suggests that the college graduation gap that affects minority students is not based on race, but on wealth (Tough, 2014). The gap is not one built
on resources, teachers or academic strategies, but on the nature of the outside support in a student’s life, which takes the supportive form of hope creators or the daunting criticism of hope crushers. My doctoral research on those at the other end of the hope spectrum, alternative school students, revealed that low hope that can be powerfully shaped by negative others in your life. In this case, low hope serves, not as a rainbow in the mind, but as a storm cloud in the mind (Sheehan, 2014).

Here is a secret that should not be kept. The boys that I have had the honor to work with have had their lives changed by catholic schools that have created hope in their lives. This ability of a school to create hope and increase self-belief is what all schools should be about. What public schools have gotten wrong in their national obsession with test scores originating from our dismal international standings is that lower test scores on more rigorous assessments will not create motivation in students, but will destroy it. In providing young students with tests beyond their abilities, schools may be unintentionally destroying hope and lowering self-esteem. Teachers seem to know this as a byproduct of their looking in the eyes of the children every day. Unfortunately, this fact has escaped too many politicians who have never spent any significant time in a classroom with children.

When I had the opportunity to speak to one thousand teachers in the Diocesan Schools at their convention in October, I celebrated with them that their daily mission is now validated in the emerging research on hope. I shared with them that the studies and research reveal what they have known all along: We have an incredible power in a classroom to create hope in children. This is a secret that should not be kept in a vault, but should be shouted from the mountaintops.

Dr. Kevin Sheehan is an associate professor at Molloy College in the Division of Education. You can view Dr. Sheehan’s presentation on this topic, entitled “Storm Clouds in the Mind: The Role of Hope and Grit in Changing the Conversation In Our Head” online as part of the Molloy College – The Public Square 2.0 series (www.molloy.edu/about-molloy-college/office-of-the-president/the-public-square). Dr. Sheehan also has a book coming out in 2016 from Rowman and Littlefield publishers titled ‘Unlocking Children’s Strengths: Growing a Growth Mindset with Children’s Literature’.

References