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In July 2010, the first month of his new position as superintendent of Catholic Schools for the Diocese of Grand Rapids, Michigan, David Faber was charged with merging three small, rural Catholic schools by fall 2011. Operating on the old adage that necessity is the mother of invention, he proceeded by proposing to the three school communities a new model of merger that now holds promise for the future—a virtual merger with satellite locations.

St. Michael, St. Catherine and St. Joseph schools have respective enrollments of 26 (K-7), 41 (K-7), and 58 (K-8) and are located within an approximate 15 mile radius of one another in rural southwest Michigan. The schools were recommended for merger during a two-year diocesan-wide pastoral planning process. In a 2010 poll of the three communities, it became clear that most families would only continue to enroll their children if the merged school site was physically located at their current school. This meant that the future viability of each school would be in question.

Inspired by the conviction that every student mattered, and understanding that Catholic schools are a powerful tool for evangelization, Faber set out to create a merger opportunity that would result in 100 percent retention with the capacity to attract new students. Faber also aimed to enable small rural communities to preserve their most treasured connection to the local parish and community.

Hedgehog Concept and Business Model Applied

In “Good to Great” (2001), Jim Collins draws the conclusion that the good companies he studied that became great companies used the hedgehog concept, noting that “they have a piercing insight that allows them to see through complexity and discern underlying patterns. Hedgehogs see what is essential, and ignore the rest.” An example Collins uses to illustrate this concept has particular relevance to the future of small Catholic schools. According to Collins, the Walgreens drug store chain generated returns between the years 1975 to 2000 that exceeded the market by more than 15 times with a simple concept: Create “the best, most convenient drugstores, with high profit per customer visit.” Faber saw a connection between Walgreens’ successful business model and the future of Catholic schools. When the same hedgehog thinking is applied to Catholic schools, we have the opportunity to create the best, most convenient
schools, with a sustainable student-to-teacher ratio.

Faber proposed a virtual merger with satellite sites. The locations could be designed to meet the three goals of the simple hedgehog concept: (1) Design and implement the best Catholic education (2) at the most convenient locations (current school sites) (3) with a sustainable student-to-teacher ratio. When the communities were given the choice between a virtual merger of satellites and a traditional Catholic school merger, the satellite merger became the clear choice. However, many questions remained about how this could be accomplished.

Creating a Virtual Merger at Satellite Sites

At the time, St. Michael parish was assigned a senior priest/parish administrator and St. Catherine and St. Joseph shared a pastor with another neighboring parish. Both priests recognized the need to create a sustainable model and were supportive. Meetings with each of the three principals and three school boards ensued. Local school and community leaders were presented with the concerns and the concept.

Spurred on by a sense of urgency, leaders emerged from the group with expertise in strategic planning, finance, instructional technology, marketing and higher education. These leaders engaged with faculty and staff and soon they were meeting regularly, visiting other small schools around the state and in neighboring states to identify best practices and create a new sustainable model.

By November 2010, it was decided to reduce the school administration from three principals to one shared principal who would begin to assist the three communities to act collaboratively in their planning efforts. The principal began to assess school enrollments, class sizes and possible class configurations after right-sizing and matching teacher credentials with the future needs of the satellite sites. The faculty was aware throughout this process that there would need to be a reduction in staff in order to make the program sustainable. By February 2011, through the collaborative effort of the three communities and the strong leadership of several talented individuals, the WINGS Satellite Initiative was introduced to the community.

WINGS Satellites

WINGS is an acronym for World Knowledge; Individualized, Innovative Education; Nurturing, Family Environment; God-centered; and Supportive Technology. WINGS Satellite school sites are currently located at St. Catherine in Ravenna, St. Joseph in Wright and St. Michael in Coopersville. They have been virtually merged under one administration with many shared services, featuring one-to-one computing and blended learning in classrooms of students of multiple grade levels. Students in these classrooms work with their teacher through an individualized workshop model that allows students to advance at a personalized pace, offers new challenges to those who are ready and reinforces skills for those who need a little more support.

Melanie Grover, current WINGS Satellite Initiative school board chair and champion of this effort, worked successfully with the three communities to define and articulate the model as well as present it to parents in the spring of 2011 (Grover & Morey, 2011). Parents attended one of six open houses to learn about WINGS and the features of a typical WINGS classroom. These open
houses were held in a model classroom. At this point, registration for the 2011-12 school year began, and there was a growing level of excitement about the new model.

Systemic change from a traditional Catholic school model to the WINGS model presented challenges such as a significant reduction in faculty, the transition to multiple grade levels in one classroom, new teaching methodology and new technology. Grover and other board members worked with their committees and transition plans were put into place. Meanwhile the principal continued to assess the skills of teachers, their openness to the new model and their ability to be successful in a WINGS classroom. There is no easy way to make these determinations, but after much deliberation, a plan was put into place to reduce the teaching staff from four to two at St. Catherine, from five to three at St. Joseph, and from three to one and an aide at St. Michael. This created one multi-grade (K to 7) classroom at St. Michael, two multi-grade (K to 3 and 4 to 7) classrooms at St. Catherine, and three multi-grade (K to 2, 3 to 5, 6 to 8) classrooms at St. Joseph.

Use of the hedgehog concept and Walgreens’ simple business model in the creation of the WINGS virtual merger made it possible to accomplish three goals. The first was to significantly upgrade the quality of 21st century instructional delivery through a personalized workshop model, one-to-one computing and blended learning (National Education Technology, 2010; Wolf, 2010); second, to maximize potential components. Even kindergartners verbalize their goals and share their progress throughout the year. Evidence is collected by the teacher and student through the Student Growth Portfolios that become a treasured, timely collection of where the student has been, where the student is presently and where the student is headed. These portfolios are reviewed frequently by parents, teacher and student.

DeYoung describes the role of the WINGS teacher as one that shifts from a traditional supplier of information to that of a learning coach. “If I were coaching basketball and I had a player miss multiple free throws in a game, I would have that player work specifically on free throws in practice while the rest of my team may be working on passing, others on ball handling and some on developing and implementing new plays,” DeYoung said. “It is the same responsibility of a learning coach. Determine where your players are by various assessments and focus on what they need to play better.” There will be students in every classroom working on different skills at various times throughout the day. Rarely will there be any whole group instruction taking place. WINGS classrooms are equipped with an interactive whiteboard, additional wall-mounted flat-screen monitors for small-group presentations and group sharing, wireless netbooks or laptops with headphones and moveable furnishings.

WINGS classrooms are using digital resources including Spelling City, IXL Math, Reading A to Z, Education 2020, Holt-McDougal, Think Central and Rosetta Stone. They also are using Battle Creek Math and

### Student Growth Portfolios and the Workshop Model

In order to help meet the pedagogical challenges of providing personalized learning opportunities, an important learning management feature was implemented during the second semester of the 2011-2012 school year. Student growth portfolios became a regular part of the program, helping students and teachers track academic progress and set learning goals.

Grades six through eight share a classroom at the St. Joseph’s satellite site

“I was amazed to see that one of my little first graders was able to demonstrate a two-grade level growth in both reading and mathematics in only six months,” said Nicole Patterson, a teacher at the St. Michael site. Gina Bouwhuis, a teacher at the St. Joseph site said, “After teaching this way only for two months, I feel so guilty that I made so many students over the years sit through whole group lessons in my classroom that they didn’t need or weren’t ready to understand.” In a spring 2012 anonymous electronic survey, one parent volunteered this comment, “I am so excited about this style of learning. My son likes the multi-grade level classroom, and I appreciate the family atmosphere. I am happy to assist in any way possible because I believe in WINGS.”

“I can best describe the workshop model as organized chaos,” said WINGS Principal/Director Kendra DeYoung. “If you have ever seen the YouTube video about herding cats, this is a glimpse into the life of a teacher leading the workshop model within a multi-age classroom.” DeYoung initiated the “just-right” learning model and multi-aged approach in a newly opened magnet school within a public school district in 2007 before coming to the Diocese of Grand Rapids in January 2012. DeYoung is passionate about every student deserving a “special” education regardless of ability. In the fall of each school year, parents, teacher and student come together to review progress of the past year and set goals for the current year that are specific to each individual student. Goals incorporate the whole child by focusing on emotional, physical, academic and spiritual
enrollment by making the satellite locations as convenient as possible (remaining at local parishes); and third, to create a sustainable student-to-faculty ratio that allowed the WINGS virtual merger to grow to 113 percent of the previous year’s combined enrollment, while realizing an overall reduction in total expenses of nearly 17 percent or more than $150,000 annually.

A portion of the new growth came from new Catholic families at the kindergarten level, strong retention from 2010-2011 to 2011-2012 and some new non-Catholic enrollees at St. Catherine in particular. With careful and strategic marketing including grass-roots personal invitations from current families, enrollments should begin to increase a little each year. However, these are small rural communities where population growth is limited and, thus, the need for a sustainable small Catholic school model.

**Governance**

Richard Burke of Catholic School

WINGS students showed growth above the national average in 20 out of 27 focus areas. National averages are based on the fall to spring growth of more than five million students across the United States. In many cases, the growth of WINGS students was well above the national average. One example was the third grade, which had a reading growth average of 14.5. The national average reading growth for third grade is six points from early fall to late spring, so the results for third grade WINGS students, at more than twice the national average, indicated outstanding academic progress. Monitoring student academic growth has affirmed the WINGS academic philosophy of providing the personalized learning for the students and it has empowered teachers to make informed decisions around designing learning experiences for every student’s “just right path and pace.”

**Technology Plan**

The teaching and learning in WINGS Satellites is representative of the expectation of the National Education Technology Plan (2010): “The model of learning described in this plan calls for engaging and empowering learning experiences for all learners. The model asks that we focus what and how we teach to match what people need to know, how they learn, where and when they will learn, and who needs to learn. It brings state-of-the-art technology into learning to enable, motivate, and inspire all students, regardless of background, languages, or disabilities, to achieve. It leverages the power of technology to provide personalized learning and to enable continuous and lifelong learning” (p.8).
involved joint meetings, formation of an executive committee of the three board chairs that met every other month and, finally, a recruitment letter to 25 or so targeted professionals from the three communities. These individuals were invited to attend an informational meeting about the governance needs of the new virtually merged satellite school community. The response was outstanding and produced a pool of talented candidates for possible nomination to the board or for service on board committees. Board members will be recommended to the pastor/canonical administrator according to the process outlined in the WINGS Satellites Governance Model (Diocese of Grand Rapids, 2012).

Unlike other boards within the diocese, this board also will include three additional standing committees, one representing the needs of each of the three participating parish/schools. The funding model is still parish based. Each parish is responsible for the facility and faculty that are specific to their site. All shared resources are divided according to the proportional number of students participating at the individual site. Tuition and parish investment is negotiated with the finance council and pastor at each individual site using diocesan benchmarks to move the three sites toward more standard operating practice.

**Challenges**

Lest this story seem too good to be true, the 2011-2012 school year began with more than its share of challenges. Bandwidth was not adequate, the learning management system and educational software did not work as planned and the learning curve to the new instructional delivery proved to be steep. Students, teachers, parents, board members and pastors were proactive and patient. Through the grace of God, we were blessed with the talents of a new principal and additional IT assistance to help the program gain momentum and finish the year strong. The model is well under way for the current 2012-2013 school year.

Faber believes strongly, “As many families move out of the city centers and into suburban and rural settings, there is an opportunity to develop new small WINGS Satellite sites at parishes that are not able to sustain a school of their own, but likely could sustain a classroom or two. By virtually connecting small new WINGS Satellite sites to other well-established Catholic schools, we can expand the ministry of Catholic education providing a powerful tool for the new evangelization.”

David Faber is the superintendent of Catholic Schools in the Diocese of Grand Rapids. He holds his M.Ed. in educational leadership from Grand Valley State University and a B.S. in elementary education from Franciscan University. As a certified K-12 administrator and K-8 teacher, he spent his first four years teaching fifth grade in Zeeland, Michigan, and 17 years as an elementary principal (P-8) at St. Thomas Apostle School in Grand Rapids, Michigan (dfaber@dioceseofgrandrapids.org). Cindy Kendall is assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction, and technology integration in the Diocese of Grand Rapids. She holds an Ed.S. in curriculum, teaching and educational policy from Michigan State University. A certified K-12 administrator, she has extensive experience as a classroom teacher and instructional technologist (ckendall@dioceseofgrandrapids.org). Melanie Grover works for Grand Valley State University’s Office of Housing and Residence Life. She holds a B.S. in sociology from Grand Valley State University and is working on a master’s of education degree from Grand Valley. She has served as the St. Catherine board president and is a member of the joint board of trustees and executive committee. She acted as interim WINGS Program Coordinator in 2012 and has extensive knowledge of the consolidation/collaboration process and the development of the WINGS Initiative (groverm@gvsu.edu).

Kendra DeYoung graduated from Central Michigan University with a B.S. in elementary education and obtained a M.A. in educational leadership from Grand Valley State University. She taught middle school science within Hamilton Community Schools, was curriculum coordinator in the areas math and science K-12 for Hudsonville Public Schools, creator and leader of Innocademy, a stand-alone charter school in West Michigan, and now is in her first year of leading the WINGS Initiative within the Diocese of Grand Rapids.

**References**


