

**DIOCESE OF GRAND RAPIDS**  
CATHOLIC SCHOOL IDENTITY INVENTORY (CSII)

SAINT THOMAS THE APOSTLE, GRAND RAPIDS

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**ACE Consulting**  
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**The University of Notre Dame**



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# DIOCESE OF GRAND RAPIDS

## CATHOLIC SCHOOL IDENTITY INVENTORY (CSII)

Mr. David Faber, Superintendent of Catholic Schools for the Catholic Diocese of Grand rapids, initially contacted the Catholic School Identity Inventory (CSII) team in summer of 2013 to help identify, assess, and enhance the constitutive elements of Catholic identity manifested at select schools within the diocese. In a letter accompanying the diocesan vision statement for Catholic schools, Faber wrote:

“Investing in our mission, “An alliance of Catholic schools where Christ illuminates learning and life”, is a choice for MORE! This mission is our purpose and promise, and it gives students the timeless treasures of strong faith and quality education. This choice for MORE is a true advantage for students as they face a future of great change and challenge. I encourage you to strengthen your resolve and trust in the Lord that a commitment to Catholic schools is the very best investment possible for the education of today’s students.”

To that end, plans were made to begin the CSII assessment process at four schools during the 2013-2014 academic year.

A one-day school visit provided ample opportunity to conduct the facility tour, classroom observations, and stakeholder interviews that comprise the CSII on-site assessments. Additional visitation days for specific classroom observations, special events, or follow-up questions and interviews were conducted as needs arose. A stakeholder survey was administered electronically following the site visits, and relevant materials were provided to conduct a thorough document analysis (see Figure 1 for an overview of data sources). On-site activities and provided print materials comprise the primary sources considered for this final report. Relevant methodological information, an overview of the complete CSII framework, and specific findings generated through the CSII instrumentation and process are included in this report.

Since the four schools engaged in the CSII process are separate juridic persons or a part of four separate juridic persons, this report addresses each school independently without reference or comparison to another school. Because the schools were invited to participate in the CSII process and do not represent any randomized or purposive sampling of all schools, data are reported for each school as an individual unit of analysis.

The four schools engaged in the CSII process include two diocesan high schools-West Catholic and Catholic Central-and two elementary schools-St. Thomas the Apostle, a single-parish school and All Saints Academy, a school supported by four parishes (Blessed Sacrament, St. Alphonsus, St. Isidore, and St. Jude) and comprised of an elementary campus and a middle school campus.

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## BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

### Purpose

The purpose of the Catholic School Identity Inventory (CSII) is to provide schools and systems of schools with a systematic and empirically sound set of tools to identify, assess, and enhance the Catholic identity of Catholic schools. We believe that the Catholic school is the “privileged environment in which a Christian education is carried out” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1998, §11). As such, every dimension of Catholic school life actively contributes to establishing, building, strengthening, sustaining and celebrating a Catholic worldview through the educational process common to all schools.

The CSII provides an empirical, data-driven assessment of school-based indicators of Catholic identity founded on the rich tradition of Church teaching and informed by decades of research on the distinctiveness of Catholic schools that values all aspects of school life as integral to Catholic identity. The CSII is designed around seven (7) core, constitutive elements. These elements are rooted in official Church documents and teaching on education, *The Code of Canon Law*, Christian formation principles, *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools*, and *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* and affirm the Catholic identity of the Catholic school as: 1. Christian (+Incarnational), 2. Trinitarian, 3. Sacramental, 4. Ecclesiological, 5. Canonical, 6. Evangelical (+Paschal), and 7. Educational (+Catechetical) (see Appendix A for a full list and explanation of the constitutive elements).

### Approach

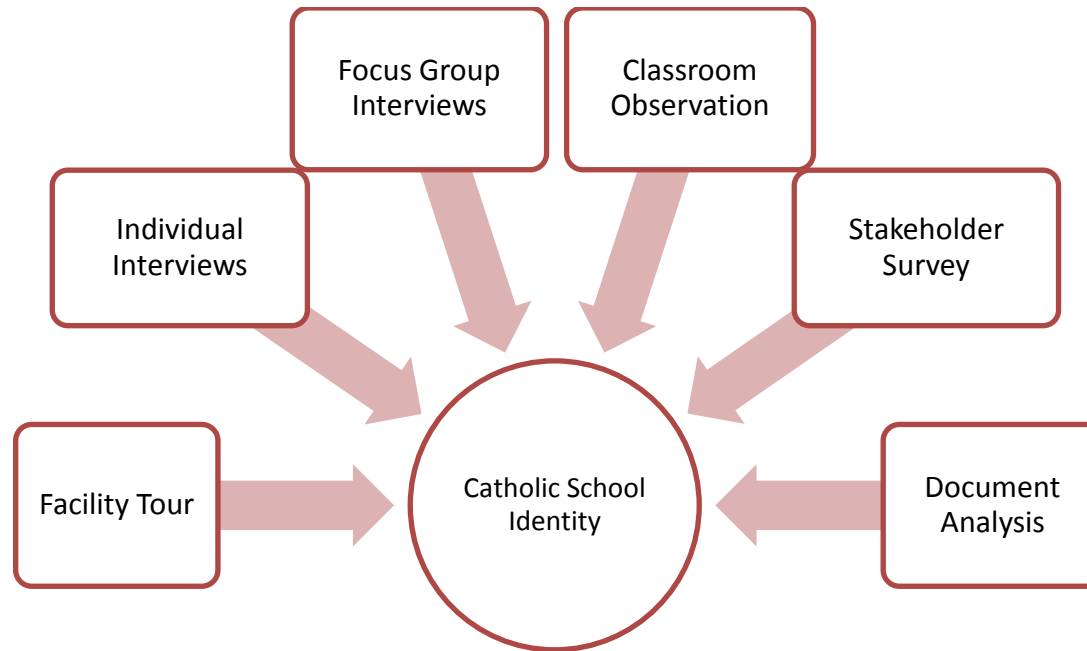
The CSII employs a combination of quantitative and qualitative instruments and procedures to achieve a balanced, mixed-method approach to the assessment of Catholic school identity. This simultaneous and parallel application of mixed methods is appropriate and even preferred when the topic of study “is present in a complex educational or social context” (Mertens, 2010, p. 294). Given the complexity of the definition and manifestation of Catholic identity in school communities, a mixed-method approach provides the most effective means for identifying and assessing the constitutive elements of Catholic identity. This final report, the primary deliverable of the CSII process, includes data gathered from these varied methods to provide a formative assessment, commendations, and recommendations for overall improvement and growth (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2004).

Most existing measures of Catholic identity rely on self-report surveys or general checklists, and have limited contact with the actual school context and community. The CSII avoids these limitations through an extensive suite of instruments and activities that allow for a comprehensive understanding of the Catholic identity of the school community. These instruments and activities include: general demographic information about the school community; document analysis of school mission, philosophy, and handbook; a review of the religion curriculum; observations of multiple classrooms; a tour and evaluation of the school building and grounds; individual interviews with school and school committee leaders; separate focus group interviews with an array of faculty and students; and additional meetings and interviews with school stakeholders at the discretion of the school principal or president.

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## Data Sources and Procedures

FIGURE 1. DATA SOURCES: CATHOLIC SCHOOL IDENTITY INVENTORY (CSII)



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## SECTION 1: SAINT THOMAS THE APOSTLE, GRAND RAPIDS

### METHOD

#### **Semi-structured Interviews and Focus Groups**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three (3) school leaders. Separate focus groups were conducted with faculty ( $n = 9$ ), school board ( $n = 7$ ), and student ( $n = 5$ ) groups. Faculty participants were representatives from varying grade levels within the school who were able to meet during the student lunch period, and were therefore available to meet for an extended interview. All students were selected for participation by the school administration and were representatives from grades four through eight. The principal, assistant principal, and pastor all participated in personal and group interviews.

#### **Survey of School Stakeholders**

All school faculty and staff at Saint Thomas the Apostle were invited to complete an online survey once the school visit was complete. Eleven ( $n=11$ ) completed surveys were received, representing a 50% response rate.

#### **Overview**

A school visit plan was developed in collaboration with the principal, Suzi Furtwangler, to facilitate the interview and observational components of the CSII process. Dr. Mary McDonald and Fr. Ron Nuzzi arrived for the planned visit on Monday, November 18, 2013, but discovered that a city-wide, weather-related power outage had forced the cancellation of school. The CSII Team visit was therefore necessarily delayed to Tuesday, November 19, 2013. Below is a description of the specific activities and assessment protocols implemented during the school visit. All data gathered through the instruments and procedures described below were analyzed for inclusion in the final report; no stakeholders are directly associated with a specific response or quote to protect their anonymity, except with their explicit permission.

#### **Tour of Facility**

Select students provided a tour of the facility that included all primary sections of the school facility: administrative offices, individual classrooms, the cafeteria, school chapel, ministry center, church, and outdoor play and gathering areas. The facility tour provided a general sense of the school grounds and an opportunity to examine the visible, physical symbols and environmental elements that communicate the Catholic character of the school community.

#### **Individual Interviews**

Individual interviews were conducted with the school principal and assistant principal in the principal's office and with the parish pastor in the rectory. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and followed a semi-structured interview protocol. Interviewees were asked questions such as "Where is the Catholic identity of your school most evident?" and "Where could the

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Catholic identity of your school be improved?” Additional questions were asked of each interviewee relative to their professional responsibilities within the school.

### **Focus Group Interviews**

Three (3) focus group interviews were conducted with teachers ( $n = 9$ ), school board members ( $n = 7$ ), and students ( $n = 5$ ). Teacher interviews were conducted in the Ministry Center Community Room. Student interviews were conducted in the Atrium and in the school chapel. School board members were interviewed at different times in the Ministry Center Community Room and the Green Room. The focus group interview of teachers lasted approximately one (1) hour and began with the prompting question “What makes your school a strong Catholic school?” Teachers spoke openly with the interviewer and one another discussing a wide range of topics related to the Catholic identity of Saint Thomas the Apostle Catholic School. Follow-up questions were asked of participants based on their original statements or responses to statements made by others. The focus group interview of students lasted approximately thirty five (35) minutes and began with the prompting question “What is it about this school that makes it a great Catholic school?” Students were encouraged to speak freely and respond directly to the statements or questions of their peers. An additional focus group interview was conducted with school board members, and lasted approximately forty five (45) minutes.

### **Classroom Observations**

Classroom observations were conducted in Grade 3 (Abby VanDyke) and Grade 5 (Sally Fochtman). Each observation lasted between thirty (30) and thirty-five (35) minutes wherein the school visit team was attuned to the arrangement and organization of the physical classroom space, teacher rapport with students, pedagogical techniques and level of student engagement and discourse.

### **Stakeholder Survey**

After the completion of the school visit on November 19, 2013, the school office provided the CSII school visit team with a complete list of faculty and staff Emails, and informed all school stakeholders via Email that they would be receiving an invitation to complete an electronic survey to further assess individual dispositions and perceptions of Catholic identity at Saint Thomas the Apostle School. An invitation to participate was sent to all stakeholders on November 21, 2013 via SurveyMonkey. The survey instrument consisted of twenty (20) questions across three primary categories: general demographic information, multiple-choice survey items, and open-ended survey items. Participants were asked to respond on a four-point scale ranging from *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree* to questions such as “The Catholic school is an essential ministry of the Catholic church?” and “My school is characterized by respect and cooperation even when there are differences of opinion?” The survey concluded with three (3) open-ended questions that allowed participants to respond in greater depth to the areas of strength and areas for improvement regarding the Catholic identity of their school. The deadline for completing the survey was December 1, 2013. Eleven ( $n=11$ ) completed surveys were received, representing a 50% response rate.

### **Document Review**

A request for pertinent school documents and policies was made of the school principal during the planning phase of the CSII process. Ms. Furtwangler provided the CSII team copies of all requested documents including: a) CSII Self-Study Questionnaire; b)



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school mission and vision statement; c) the religion curriculum; d) school calendar; and e) a complete copy of the 2011 faculty/staff handbook. Additional documents provided included a recent publication for the parish 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration and several articles written by the pastor for parents regarding Catholic education. The documents were reviewed individually and as a whole to discern how school policies and procedures evince and support the constitutive elements of Catholic identity at Saint Thomas the Apostle Catholic School.

## **SCHOOL VISIT SCHEDULE: SAINT THOMAS THE APOSTLE**

**November 19, 2013**

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- 7:30 Meet Mrs. Suzi Furtwangler in the School Office
- 8:00 All School First Bell Prayer (*Blacktop behind school*)
- 8:08 Daily Announcements and Prayer (*School Office*)
- 8:15 Continental Breakfast with Home & School and School Parents:  
Home & School President: Missy Sharpe  
School Parents: Stacy Chalfoun, Kelly Olive, Maureen Muraski  
Marc Wadaga  
(*Ministry Center Community Room*)
- 9:00 Campus Tour: Student Tour Guides  
Regina Faber, Sebastian Langenbach, Anna Rosloniec, Konnor Barth
- 9:45 Classroom Observations: Abby VanDyke (Gr. 3), Sally Fochtman (Gr. 5)
- 10:15 Interview with Suzi Furtwangler, Principal and Liz Peters, Assistant Principal  
(*Green Room*)
- 11:30-12:30 Working Lunch (*Ministry Center Community Room*)  
Interviews with teachers:  
Holly Lake (Gr. 1), Conrad Budzynski (Gr. 3), Moreen O'Neil (Jr. High Science), Ed Carr (Jr. High Math), Adam Baxter (Jr. High Religion/Social Studies)
- 12:45 Interview with Religion Teachers—20 minutes each:  
Mary Ann Bridge (Preschool), Brenda Tietema (Gr. 2), Bethann Petkus (Gr. 4)  
(*P3 in Atrium, Gr. 2 & 4 in the Chapel*)
- 1:45 Interviews with Students: (*Chapel*)  
Grace Braselton (Gr. 4), Mary Wheeler (Gr. 5), Keegan Greene (Gr. 6),  
Mary Grace Doyle (Gr. 7), Joseph Blanco (Gr. 8)
- 2:15 Tea with Father Jim and Suzi Furtwangler (*Rectory*)

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3:10 End of Day Prayer (*School Office*)

3:15 Brief Reception with School Faculty and Staff (*Ministry Center Community Room*)

3:40 Interviews with School Board (*Ministry Center Community Room*)

Board President: Ed Mikolay

Board Members: Amy Den Braber, Susan Whitney-Brown, Doug Karel, Keith Barth, John Schuring, Denise Deveau

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## FINDINGS

The findings section of the report is organized around the seven (7) constitutive elements of Catholic identity that comprise the framework of the Catholic School Identity Inventory (CSII) (see Appendix A). The narrative and data presented in each of the following categories are drawn from each of the major data sources discussed above (see Figure 1) and are designed to highlight some of the ways in which the school community manifests indicators for each of the seven (7) constitutive elements. Therefore, the following findings section provides a general overview and an objective assessment of extant Catholic school identity at Saint Thomas the Apostle Catholic School, and supports both the commendations and recommendations for continued growth.

### **Christian (+Incarnational)**

The mission statement of Saint Thomas the Apostle School states that the school “provides a dynamic education centered in Christ.” Examination of materials provided expanding on the mission statement revealed that they include Gospel values of service and love, and extol Christ as a source of strength and model for all members of the school community. The school handbook states that “discipline at Saint Thomas is viewed as discipling. Prayer, inviting Jesus into our conversation places us in the frame of mind that invites a student to reflect not on what they did wrong, but on how what they did affected others.” The strong Christian mission of the school was also evident in policies regarding the stated purpose and goals of a Catholic education—specifically that the school seeks to provide a high quality Catholic education for students in partnership with parents.

CSII analysis revealed strong institutional and individual commitment to the Gospel and a personal relationship with Christ. Teachers, administrators, students, and board members all spoke of the importance of faith in their lives and place that prayer occupies in their own spiritual lives.

This strong focus on prayer and the person of Christ was also seen in the survey results. When asked about Christ serving as the model of perfection for those in Catholic schools, respondents were strong and clear in their agreement ( $M=3.91/4.0$ ), with over 90% indicating ‘strong agreement.’ A similar strong response was revealed when stakeholders were asked whether or not they made frequent reference to Jesus and the Gospel in interactions with students. A full 100% of respondents ( $M=3.73/4.0$ ) indicated “strongly agree’ or ‘agree.’ These results indicate a shared faith as well as a willing to witness to that faith in the ministerial setting of the Catholic school.

### **Trinitarian**

Responses from multiple stakeholder groups affirmed the strong sense of community that characterizes Saint Thomas the Apostle parish and school. When asked where the Catholic identity of the school is most evident or vibrant, stakeholders first mentioned “how people are there for each other” and “it’s just the community itself. Everybody is warm and friendly with each other.” Students characterized the school as “like one big happy family” where “everybody knows everybody.” This sense of a caring family was evident through the interactions among students and between students and faculty throughout the course of the visit. Parish and

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school leaders are referred to often and with respect and love for the example and direction they provide. The pastor and principal in particular are held in high esteem by the broader parish and school community.

Even though Saint Thomas the Apostle is a very tight-knit parish and school community, stakeholders shared opportunities to improve and strengthen this constitutive element. One particular area of growth is the potential of the school to leverage parent involvement in a way that helps to provide ongoing faith formation and catechetical experiences. Several stakeholders indicated that there is a growing need to help educate parents in the Catholic faith; others wondered if the school might be an effective vehicle for inviting adults to gather and discuss their faith, perhaps providing an opportunity to educate and form the families that the school children are a part of.

Survey responses in this constitutive element were strong, with all respondents ( $M=3.82/4.0$ ) indicating 'strongly agree' or 'agree' with the statement that the Christian faith is developed best in community. One hundred percent of respondents also 'strongly agree' or 'agree' that the school is characterized by respect and cooperation, even when there are differences of opinion or practice. These results reveal a strong and faith-filled community at Saint Thomas the Apostle, one formed around a shared vision of the church and operationalized in the ministry of the school.

### **Sacramental**

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The priority of sacramental and liturgical experiences at Saint Thomas the Apostle School was evident through official policies provided in the school handbook, and through the shared comments and experiences of stakeholder groups. Specific sections of the school handbook confirm that all members of the school community participate in the weekly school Mass. The annual Mass schedule indicates that Mass is celebrated throughout the year, typically at 9:55 a.m. on Fridays. Different grades share the responsibility for planning in a regular rotation. In addition to weekly celebration of the Mass, students and faculty enjoy a broad array of special religious celebrations (e.g., feast day celebrations, etc.) and personal and communal prayer opportunities (e.g., All-school rosary, Eucharistic Adorations, stations of the cross, etc.) The morning prayer routine, traditionally conducted outside near the statue of the Virgin Mary, is yet another hallmark of the vibrant prayer life found at Saint Thomas the Apostle School.

Many adult stakeholders in the school community indicated that these sacramental celebrations and personal prayer experiences were personally meaningful for their own spiritual growth and development. Faculty members highlighted the importance of the habit of prayer in their own lives and as part of the praying community of the school. One faculty member reported that many active laity have spearheaded the increase of devotional practices at the parish. Other indicated that there are numerous prayer lines or prayer chains that are organized and operated solely by parents. Inspired by this prayerful community, one teacher comments simply that "I feel loved here."

Following a brief litany of all the ways students and staff celebrate at the school, one faculty member stated "we have so many opportunities where we're practicing our faith...we're actually doing it." Students highlighted the "main priority on Friday to go to Mass" as a key indicator of the Catholic identity of the school, and shared many of the ways they feel encouraged and supported to

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actively participate. Students shared that teachers “encourage you to sing and everything” and that they “get supported to altar serve and serve Jesus.” One student summed up this portion of the conversation well when they stated that this encouragement to be involved in Mass and prayer opportunities at the school is because the teachers “wanted to encourage us to glorify God.” Students also enjoyed the classroom prayer time as an opportunity “where I can just speak to God personally.” The high quality and intentional focus on prayer was observed during the CSII team visit to Saint Thomas the Apostle classrooms and common school areas were found to be rich with religious imagery and artwork. Inside and outside of the building, religious imagery and artwork abound. While impressive and inspiring, the CSII Team at times felt overwhelmed by the presence of so much artwork, some of it lacking strategic purpose or placement.

Over 90% of survey respondents indicated ‘strongly agree’ ( $M=3.91/4.0$ ) when asked if regular prayer was an important part of their school experience. An identical percentage (90%) reported ‘strongly agree’ ( $M=3.83/4.0$ ) when asked if members of the school community frequently participated in the sacraments and liturgical life of the Church. These data reveal a strong orientation to prayer, Mass, and the sacraments as well as an enviable commitment to and deep engagement with the sacramental life of the Church.

### **Ecclesiological**

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Service to others—through works of charity and justice—is central to the vision and mission of Catholic schools and was found to be a characteristic of Saint Thomas the Apostle School. The commitment to service is a clearly seen in the engagement of students with elderly residents of a nearby care facility. Students quickly identified a variety of established service programs and opportunities that commitment to service: Operation Christmas Child, Samaritan’s Purse, Kids’ Food Basket, babysitting for parish events, and several others. More than a religion or confirmation requirement, these students spoke of service as something that helps people who are in need. While they did not directly relate service to the broader mission of the Church, it was clear through our conversation that students saw service as a personal responsibility that was directly related to their Catholic school experience.

The direct service opportunities facilitated by and encouraged through the school certainly advance the school’s commitment to the common good and the development of students who serve as leaven in the community. However, it was noted that while the school is good at reaching out to individuals and organizations in the immediate community, “we lack the experiences in reaching out to the outside community in service.” Seeking regular and sustained opportunities to volunteer and serve in the broader Grand Rapids community, or to find ways that students, especially older ones, could be engaged in service trips or experiences beyond Grand Rapids, could certainly address this potential shortcoming of the current service learning opportunities.

In reviewing the Catholic Identity Effectiveness Parent Survey that the school itself administered in September 2013, no major emphasis is given to service, the poor, or works of justice. While there are survey items that refer to faith formation opportunities outside the classroom, no items related the religious mission of the school to proactive works of charity or justice. This omission had the effect of limiting parents’ responses so that it is not clear what kind of priority the school places on this type of Catholic action.

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Survey responses found a strong belief in the responsibility of schools to promote justice and the common good ( $M=3.91/4.0$ ), and significant agreement ( $M=3.73/4.0$ ) that students have regular opportunities to do so.

### **Canonical**

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Saint Thomas the Apostle Catholic School was founded as ministry of Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish and is currently a single parish school. Both the parish and school are in good standing as Catholic institutions in the Diocese of Grand Rapids. Somewhat unusually, school stakeholders and school documents refer to the pastor of the parish as superintendent of the school. This is perhaps a way of clarifying the canonical responsibility of the pastor for the parish school, as canon law makes the pastor responsible for all activities and operations of the parish. In the parish school situation, the principal, while delegated many responsibilities for the day-to-day operations of a school, serves at the pleasure of the pastor. Given that the Diocese of Grand Rapids has its own proper superintendent with delineated job responsibilities, it seems to add confusion to the situation to predicate such a title of the local pastor. A fuller and more deeply grasped understanding of *The Code of Canon Law* and its relevant canons on the responsibilities of a pastor would help clarify this issue and make the improper use of the title ‘superintendent’ moot.

The document analysis of relevant school materials revealed that diocesan policies and procedures are referenced and included in key school documents. The school calendar also indicates that the school principal and faculty participate in appropriate diocesan meetings and professional development (e.g., parish ministry and catechetical conference) opportunities. Relevant school materials—including the physical environment, website, and correspondence materials—also clearly demark Saint Thomas the Apostle School as a Catholic school.

Data from the survey indicated strong and unanimous agreement with the premise that the Catholic school is an essential ministry of the Catholic Church ( $M = 4.0/4.0$ ), with 100% of respondents indicating ‘strongly agree.’ Similar agreement was found when stakeholders were asked if there was a strong relationship between the school and local parishes ( $M = 3.73/4.0$ ).

### **Evangelical (+Paschal)**

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Stakeholder interviews and document analysis confirmed that faculty, staff and students have regular opportunities to both grow in their own faith, and share that faith with others in the school community. Faculty retreats at the beginning of the year, regular opportunities to celebrate Mass as a school community, daily communal prayer in the classroom, monthly prayer of the rosary, and sacramental preparation are several of the formal ways that Saint Thomas the Apostle facilitates the evangelical component of Catholic school identity.

Several faculty members mentioned that their students are “going home sharing what they’re learning and they’re teaching their parents [about the Catholic faith].” Teachers also shared that they have talked to parents at conferences about taking their children to Mass and making sure that they are involved in the life of the parish. These efforts were borne out of the realization that the catechesis and growth in personal faith that happen through the school must be nurtured in the home. The school handbook affirms

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the primacy of the parents in the education and religious formation of their children and that “parents cannot give their children what they do not have.” The pamphlet and brochures written and published by the pastor also emphasize the exalted role that parents play in the life of their children and the partnership that comes with enrolling them in a Catholic school. Many teachers suggested that this focus on parental involvement has helped parents “rejuvenate their Catholic roots and brings them back to the Church.” Students indicated that sharing their faith is easier because of the small and tightly knit school atmosphere. One student in particular stated succinctly that “we get to bond and we know a lot more people and that’s—you just tend to bond more and especially in your faith. And you can share with the little ones ‘God loves you. Here let me tell you more.’” When viewed collectively, these instances of sharing and growing in personal faith certainly demonstrate how the Catholic school can be understood as “one of the most effective means of evangelization.”

While the data confirm that there are indeed many opportunities for members of the school community to grow deeper in their faith, increased opportunities for spiritual formation was highlighted by stakeholders as an area of need. A school leader noted “I think spiritual formation for the adults, for the teachers, is an area that we really need to work on...but that’s a very personal thing for staff and that’s kinda hard to reach people on that level sometimes.” Another member of the school community added that “you have to differentiate with the staff, too, in a spiritual way...so that’s hard, too.”

Increased opportunities for parents to grow in their own faith along with the faculty are especially important, especially given the needed emphasis on works of justice and concern for the poor. The Paschal dimension plays an important role here, too, for the Paschal Mystery teaches that all of life’s successes and failures, all of the wins and losses in the life of a school, the ups and downs of daily life, our personal highs and lows, are all reflections of Jesus’ dying and rising and thereby constitute our participation in the life of Christ. As a developmental and theological construct, the Paschal Mystery, fully understood and celebrated, has much to offer a school community like Saint Thomas the Apostle.

Survey results revealed a consistency in this constitutive element. Over 80% of respondents indicated ‘strongly agree’ ( $M=3.73/4.0$ ) when asked about the role of Catholic schools in proclaiming the Good News. One hundred percent of respondents reported ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’ when asked if they themselves were a witness to the faith at school.

### **Educational (+Catechetical)**

Interviews with students, faculty and staff confirmed the high expectations for student learning and academic success that are shared among members of the school community. Some of the most direct and telling comments came from the students themselves. When asked what was the best thing about Saint Thomas the Apostle School, one student simply said “the teachers.” They went on to elaborate saying “the teachers are the best. . Also, they’re very strict here because they’re trying to get you prepared for college.” Others chimed in adding “they want you to be successful when you grow up.” Students also added that their teachers give them extra attention and assistance to meet these high expectations.

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The level of teacher engagement with students outside the classroom is noteworthy, especially given the demands of regular faculty meetings, the school improvement team, and other curricular and extracurricular demands. In addition to regular responsibilities, faculty are involved in programs such as *The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*, *Theology of the Body*, and anti-bullying programming. Document analysis indicated that the religion curriculum in use at Saint Thomas the Apostle is the curriculum prescribed by the Diocese of Grand Rapids and available on its website. However, familiarity with the curriculum and the textbook series used to support it is lacking. No one in the building could correctly identify the religion series in use, the publisher of the series, or which books were used in specific grades. Upon investigation, grades one through five make use of one series and grade six through eight use another. It is difficult to understand and appreciate how such textbook selections comport with the diocesan curriculum and how strategic additions such as *Theology of the Body* and anti-bullying programming fit into the overall religious education framework.

When asked if Catholic schools are as rigorous academically as other schools, all respondents ( $M=4.0/4.0$ ) indicated 'strongly agree.' Similarly, respondents were very satisfied in the academic quality of Saint Thomas the Apostle School, with all respondents ( $M=3.82/4.0$ ) indicating 'strong agree' or 'agree.'



## DATA FROM FACULTY AND STAFF SURVEY: SAINT THOMAS THE APOSTLE

Catholic School Identity Inventory (CSII): Grand Rapids  
**Stakeholder Survey Results: Saint Thomas the Apostle**

	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>Mean (SD)</b>
1. The Catholic school is an essential ministry of the Catholic Church.	11 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	4.00 (0.00)
2. Catholic schools are a privileged environment where the Good News of the Gospel is proclaimed.	9 (81.8%)	1 (9.1%)	1 (9.1%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3.73 (0.62)
3. Catholic schools must provide academic programs that are as distinguished as other schools in the area.	11 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	4.00 (0.00)
4. Regular and frequent prayer is an important component of the Catholic school experience.	10 (90.9%)	1 (9.1%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3.91 (0.29)
5. The Christian faith is developed most effectively in community.	10 (90.9%)	1 (9.1%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3.82 (0.57)
6. Christ is the model of human and spiritual perfection for all who work in Catholic schools.	10 (90.9%)	1 (9.1%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3.91 (0.29)
7. Catholic schools have a responsibility to promote justice and the common good.	9 (81.8%)	2 (18.2%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3.91 (0.29)
8. Students at my school have regular opportunities to build up the Church and the common good.	10 (90.9%)	1 (9.1%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3.73 (0.45)
9. Members of my school community frequently participate in the sacraments and liturgical life of the Church.	10 (90.9%)	1 (9.1%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3.82 (0.39)
10. I am a witness of the Catholic faith to students at my school.	8 (72.7%)	3 (27.3%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3.73 (0.45)
11. My school provides a rigorous academic program for our students.	9 (81.8%)	2 (18.2%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3.82 (0.39)
12. There is a strong relationship between my school and local parishes.	9 (81.8%)	1 (9.1%)	1 (9.1%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3.73 (0.62)
13. My school is characterized by respect and cooperation, even when there are differences of opinion or practice.	8 (72.7%)	3 (27.3%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3.73 (0.45)
14. I frequently reference Jesus and the Gospel in my interactions with students.	8 (72.7%)	3 (27.3%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3.73 (0.45)

\* Note. Totals may not equal 100% due to missing responses and rounding for individual questions and responses.

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### **1. What is the strongest component of Catholic identity in your school?**

Responses included frequent prayer, Catholic signs and symbols, and treating all with respect.

#### **Representative Quotes:**

*“Crosses are everywhere! Servant leadership is a must! Faith is first!”*

*“The faculty and staff live their faith and never apologize for being Catholic.”*

*“The environment is the first impression many visitors encounter, and it is strongly influenced by our Catholic Faith. The teachers and staff are always reminders of the Catholic Faith to all who come to our building as well. There really is no doubt that we are a Catholic School in our environment and our schedule of Faith opportunities provided for the students throughout the day.”*

*“The strongest component of Catholic identity at our school is the amount of formal prayer that we do as a community each day. Time is made for prayer before the students enter the building in the morning, we pray during morning announcements, before classes, before and after meals, the Angelus is said each day after lunch, and we end our day with prayer.”*

*“Catholic Identity is infused into everything our school does. I feel it in the classrooms but even our building and our artwork surrounds us with our catholic identity.”*

### **2. How could the Catholic identity of your school be improved?**

There were several who said no improvements needed or did not respond. Some indicated a better relationship with the parish and outside community.

#### **Representative Quotes:**

*“We are working on having a stronger relationship with the parish.”*

*“I believe that the wonderful feeling of family we have created inside our school could and should be extended to the parish and surrounding community.”*

### **3. Please provide any additional comments or suggestions regarding the Catholic Identity of your school.**

Very few responses. Those that did respond focused on their joy to be part of such a wonderful school environment.

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**Representative Quotes:**

*"St. Thomas is like a close knit faith filled family. Every day and in many ways we model and live our Catholic faith. As soon as you enter our school, you feel the Holy Spirit ascending upon you and those within the building."*

*"I have only been at Saint Thomas for a few months, but I am overjoyed and inspired by the faith that is in this school. I know that God led me here so that I could not only continue my ministry as a leader in the Catholic schools, but also so that my faith journey would be reenergized. The community at Saint Thomas is warm and welcoming...it is truly led by people of faith, and is creating faith filled leaders for our world!"*

## Catholic School Identity Inventory (CSII) Rubric: Saint Thomas the Apostle

The CSII Rubric rates the presence and effect of the seven (7) constitutive elements of Catholic identity at Saint Thomas the Apostle School:

	Limited	Basic	Proficient	Exceptional
	The majority of the CSII indicators are not present or are consistently weak in their manifestation.	The majority of the CSII indicators are present, but their strength and power are inconsistently or sporadically manifested.	The majority of the CSII indicators are strongly and consistently manifested.	The majority of CSII indicators consistently exceed standards and are markedly impressive and inspiring in their manifestation.
1. Christian (+ Incarnational)				
2. Trinitarian				
3. Sacramental				
4. Ecclesiological				
5. Canonical				
6. Evangelical (+ Paschal)				
7. Educational (+ Catechetical)				

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## COMMENDATIONS

Commendations highlight the exceptional programs, policies, and experiences across the seven (7) constitutive elements of Catholic identity.

### **Commendation #1: Caring Catholic Community**

Stakeholders highlighted “community” as the single most common descriptor of the Catholic identity of Saint Thomas the Apostle School. This deep sense of community is evident in the positive relationships between teachers and students, between school personnel, parents and parishioners who all support the mission of the school, and among and across student groups. Community is nurtured by concrete leadership actions (e.g., the new family mentor program whereby any family new to the school is assigned a mentor family for a year) and through the relationships that develop organically when members of the school community worship and work together.

### **Commendation #2: Hospitality, Dedication, Sacrifice, and Attention to Detail**

Teachers, parents, board members, and school and parish leaders are to be lauded for the tremendous dedication and deep personal sacrifices they have made on behalf of the children they teach and form in the faith – a disposition that flows from the strong community bonds that define and strengthen the school community. The CSII Team experienced this passion and attention to detail in every aspect of our visit—from the easy, non-dramatic re-scheduling of the entire day due to the power outage to the abundance of food and drink. The adult community is clearly motivated, faithful, hospitable, and welcoming.

### **Commendation #3: Unified Catholic Vision**

The clarity of the Catholic practice at Saint Thomas the Apostle School and Parish is exceptionally strong. Adult stakeholders are of one mind and heart regarding the education of their children and this clarity of purposes resounds throughout the building and throughout the day. A statement from the parent handbook is true: “We are unapologetically Catholic.”

**“At Saint Thomas we are faithful to the Catholic Church.”**

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations highlight areas for growth and development across the seven (7) constitutive elements of Catholic identity.

### **Recommendation #1: Engage the Parent Community in Faith Formation**

Seek ways to nurture and develop the personal spiritual lives of the adults in the school community by inviting both parents and faculty to grow together and deepen their commitment to the faith. Their personal faith and sense of mission compel them send their children to the school or to teach in the school, yet it is clear from feedback and observation that intentional and structured opportunities to explore their faith, develop language for and deeper understanding of the connection between their faith and their lives would be welcomed.

### **Recommendation #2: Sharpen Catechetical Goals**

The rich tradition of the Church and her treasures can be overwhelming if presented without regard to scope and sequencing, developmental propriety, or without the proper intellectual scaffolding. Greater care can be taken in curriculum planning for religious education and detailing the formal curriculum before introducing enrichment resources.

### **Recommendation #3: Expanding Intentional Service to the Poor and Works for Justice**

Increased opportunities for students, faculty and staff to engage in service to others outside the school community will enhance the interpersonal skills, social awareness, maturity, and dignity of all involved.

**“The faculty and staff live their faith and never apologize for being Catholic.”**

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## APPENDIX A: CONSTITUTIVE ELEMENTS OF CATHOLIC IDENTITY

1. CHRISTIAN (Inclusive of INCARNATIONAL): “Founded on Jesus Christ, the Redeemer” (Miller, 2006, p. 24). “Christ is the foundation of the whole educational enterprise in a Catholic school” (*The Catholic School*, 1977, #34).
2. TRINITARIAN: The center of the educative Christian community where relationships among community members and stakeholders reflect the perfect relationship of the Trinity. “Christian faith, in fact, is born and grows inside a community” (*The Catholic School*, 1977, #53).
3. SACRAMENTAL: “A new environment, one illumined by the light of faith and having its own unique characteristics, an environment permeated with the Gospel spirit of love and freedom (*Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*, 1988).
4. ECCLESIOLOGICAL: An essential ministry of the Church. “The Catholic school finds its true justification in the mission of the Church; it is based on an educational philosophy in which faith, culture and life are brought into harmony.... through it, the local Church evangelizes, educates, and contributes to the formation of a healthy and morally sound life-style among its members” (*Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*, 1988, #34)
5. CANONICAL: “Understood as one which a competent ecclesiastical authority or a public ecclesiastical juridic person directs (*moderator*) or which ecclesiastical authority recognizes as such through a written document (Canon, 806, #1).
6. EVANGELICAL (Inclusive of PASCHAL): One of the most effective means of evangelization – of spreading the Good News of the Gospel – in the history of the Church. “Very few Catholics, then, have the opportunity that the educator has to accomplish the very purpose of evangelization: the incarnation of the Christian message in the lives of men and women” (*Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith*, 1982, #31).
7. EDUCATIONAL (Inclusive of CATECHETICAL): Educational institutions that “pursue cultural goals and the human formation of youth. But its proper function is to create for the school community a special atmosphere animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity... so that the knowledge the students gradually acquire of the world, life and man is illumined by faith” (*Gravissimum Educationis*, 1965, #20).