



Trolley Systems, Catholic Schools & the Economics of Inclusive Education

Many years ago PBS aired a fascinating documentary about the demise of American trolley systems. It went something like this: The big Detroit automakers saw trolley systems as direct competition in urban centers and the physical infrastructure of trolley systems as a thorny impediment to convenient roadways and the usefulness of automobiles. They decided to pool their resources and buy a small regional bus company to act as a front and used this bus company to systematically begin buying the trolley systems in US cities.

Once under their control they would analyze each feeder line of the trolley system as a discrete subset and sought permission to close down those that were unprofitable. Eventually even the once profitable main arteries began operating in the red and those were also closed. Instead of selling the now closed trolley system, the rail lines and ties would be torn up and sold for scrap and the land would be sold for development of housing and roads. In this fashion virtually every urban trolley system in the US was dismantled and insurmountable barriers were established preventing their return.

The mechanism the big auto companies understood was that a single rider might use their feeder line only in the morning and evening, but would ride the major arteries multiple times per day. By trimming the feeder lines, the relationship between single origins and multiple destinations was used to destroy the viability of the entire system. The irony of course is that both the builders and destroyers of the trolley lines understood systems.

The gradual decline in enrollment of catholic Schools owes some of their struggles to the same systems phenomena. If we think of students with special needs and meeting the needs of diverse learners both as feeder lines, the absence of both challenges the viability of what remains. The mechanisms at work are the relationship between each student with special needs to their family and community, and the quality of education to all potential students. If we have the insight and courage to think like builders, investing in the inclusion of children with special needs leverages these mechanisms, reverses the decline in enrollment to the extent it can, and contributes to the economic viability of our schools. Real life examples of the inclusive schools in the Kansas City St. Joseph diocese and the schools One Classroom supports bear out this reality.

From a “costs” perspective becoming “inclusive” manifests in two basic ways, the adoption of processes and systems, and the addition of specialized human resources. What is true for both is that they impact the education of not just the newly included students with special needs, but all students in the building. The results of the investment must be measured at the system level, and not incrementally at the level of students with special needs. Becoming inclusive is about becoming a better school for all students.

Processes and Systems:

Here are just a few examples of some of the processes and systems typical of well-run inclusive schools:

PBIS: Positive Behavior Supports and Interventions, or PBIS, is a three-tiered model of behavioral support that was derived from Applied Behavior Analysis, or ABA. PBIS is a school-wide initiative that engages all staff in focusing on positive behavior and being proactive to prevent behavior challenges.

UDL: Universal Design for Learning is a “research-based set of principles to guide the design of learning environments that are accessible and effective for *all*” (cast.org, 2018). UDL makes curriculum more accessible to all learners by allowing them to access and present learning in different ways.

Peer Supports: Peer supports refers to the use of using peers in classrooms to facilitate learning, friendships, or social skills. Peer supports are used reciprocally and are viewed as a partnership between students.

Care Team/ RTI : RTI is a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) that can help learners at different levels. These initiatives cover behavior, social interactions, early intervention, and teaching methodology.

While the list above is only partial, what is easily apparent is that these processes apply to all students in the building. Close to 35% of catholic families have a child with a diagnosed learning challenge. By focusing only on the kids in the “middle” our catholic schools are losing their ability to meet the needs of every child in a family. Ultimately the techniques employed to be successful with a child with special needs are essentially the same as for meeting the needs of all learners.

Specialized Human Resources:

Specialized human resources, with skills in the area of special needs, are the second area of investment.

About 14% of students have a mild or moderate diagnosed learning challenge. Catholic schools do a reasonable job of enrolling these students. However, about 1 student in 70 has a significant special need and these students are essentially absent from our St. Louis catholic parish schools. (These are the students One Classroom is focused on helping.) GENERALLY, if a school becomes inclusive, students with special needs tend to access catholic schools early, before 3rd grade, and the youngest students, typically 4th grade or earlier, need the most direct support. As students mature they develop more functional independence and are better supported by maturing peer students.

A school would add a special education leader if one isn't already on staff, and as needed, a combination of volunteer and full or part-time para-professionals to provide direct support to children with special needs depending on the number and level of support required. All of these roles work directly with the children with special needs, with children with mild to moderate learning challenges, and with typically developing students. In a school of about 45 students per grade or a total enrollment of 400 students including a smaller pre-school and kindergarten, you would expect 56 students with diagnosed learning challenges of which 6 have significant special needs.

Economics:

Processes and systems consume dollars spent on professional development, typically over the first 3 or 4 years, and specialized human resources are an ongoing expense with modest fluctuations should the number, or level of need of a child, change year to year. Economically speaking, the object of these investments is to include children with special needs, encourage additional enrollments from siblings, neighbors and any student in need of a good education, and to improve the retention of students already enrolled. The attached guide provides a simple way of looking at the progression of costs related to inclusive education and the enrollment and retention thresholds needed to "pay" for inclusion. The assumptions in this guide, such as employee costs or tuition, are taken directly from One Classroom's experience with schools and the grant requests we review.

The guide can be boiled down to the following key relationship: Inclusion not only accommodates the children with special needs, but encourages enrollment of these children's siblings, and with the improvement in school performance, results in retaining at least 2 more children per grade, and enrolling at least two more children per grade. Said another way, aside from the children with special needs and their siblings, if a school is able to improve the number of students per grade by just 3 students the school breaks even and if they can add just 4 more students per grade inclusion generates positive cash flow. There are, of course, other issues that are impacting enrollment in catholic schools. However, real life experience tells us these required gains in enrollment are quite modest to the improvement in enrollment a school achieves as it is better able to meet the needs of its community. One Classroom's granting activity is designed to help schools as they take those first steps in the early years.

	Inclusion Pro Forma	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10
Tuition :	\$ 3,500										
Staff Training		(\$5,000)	(\$5,000)	(\$5,000)	(\$5,000)	(\$2,000)	(\$2,000)	(\$2,000)	(\$2,000)	(\$2,000)	(\$2,000)
Additional Staffing											
Special Education Leader		(\$55,000)	(\$55,000)	(\$55,000)	(\$55,000)	(\$55,000)	(\$55,000)	(\$55,000)	(\$55,000)	(\$55,000)	(\$55,000)
Para Professional 1						(\$24,000)	(\$24,000)	(\$24,000)	(\$24,000)	(\$24,000)	(\$24,000)
Para Professional 2								(\$24,000)	(\$24,000)	(\$24,000)	(\$24,000)
Para Professional 3: Volunteer				X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Para Professional 4: Volunteer										X	X
Total Costs		(\$60,000)	(\$60,000)	(\$60,000)	(\$60,000)	(\$81,000)	(\$81,000)	(\$105,000)	(\$105,000)	(\$105,000)	(\$105,000)
Number of Children with significant special needs		1	1	2	2	3	3	4	4	5	6
New Enrollment, Siblings, close family relations		1	1	2	2	3	3	4	4	5	6
Increase in enrollment, school wide, due to attracting more students			1	3	5	7	9	11	13	15	17
Improved retention, school wide, due to improved systems and processes			1	3	5	7	9	11	13	15	17
School Wide Net Increase in Students		2	4	10	14	20	24	30	34	40	46
Additional Tuition Revenues		\$7,000	\$14,000	\$35,000	\$49,000	\$70,000	\$84,000	\$105,000	\$119,000	\$140,000	\$161,000
Net Cash Flow		(\$53,000)	(\$46,000)	(\$25,000)	(\$11,000)	(\$11,000)	\$3,000	\$0	\$14,000	\$35,000	\$56,000