The Jesuit high school "system"

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ambiguity in a key area

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The concept of a "system" of Jesuit high schools evokes a variety of reactions in the Jesuit classroom teacher. Many focus on a high school's connection with other schools of its province and on their common relationship to the central province authority; others view the idea of a Jesuit high school system as a relationship existing among a national network of fifty similar secondary schools. The ambiguity which surrounds the term "system" when it is applied to Jesuit high schools is not surprising; nor is it without value. For such uncertainty points to an area of our high school apostolate which demands careful re-examination, an area which may be one of the keys in the Jesuit response to the challenges of contemporary secondary education.

New concept of administration

When school administration was selected as one of the major topics of discussion at the Workshop on the Christian Formation of the Jesuit High School Student, the implicit presupposition was that the effectiveness of this formation rested on the vitality of our schools and that this vitality depended in large part on an enlightened and smoothly operating administration. In the discussions held at the individual schools in preparation for the workshop it was perhaps
inevitable that the topic would be considered almost exclusively in
terms of the local school situation. No one would deny that such
discussions were important. Even brief experience in a Jesuit high
school is sufficient to persuade the observer that well-defined rela-
tionships among rector, principal, community, and faculty are es-
sential to the efficient functioning of a Jesuit school. Yet this
preoccupation with internal structure, which also dominated the
deliberations at Santa Clara in 1964, is unfortunate, for it tends to
divert attention from broader and more significant administrative
relationships. It likewise obscures the fact that the vitality we seek
will not be achieved by any individual school working in isolation,
but only through realistic and creative relationships and coopera-
tion with other Jesuit schools and educators.

But this is not to suggest that the individual school's administrative
problems differ essentially from those encountered on higher levels.
On all levels—local, provincial, interprovincial—the new concept
of school administration as “facilitating process” is gradually sup-
planting the decision-making function we have traditionally and
almost exclusively associated with administration. Increasingly, the
administrator will be called upon to provide a framework in which
others more skilled than himself in a particular area will have
freedom for experimentation, evaluation and decision. The rami-
fications of this shift in the individual school are obvious: the class-
room teacher or groups of teachers working in departments or
similar structures will exercise initiative and responsibility in areas
that were formerly regarded as the prerogative of the principal or
higher authority. The changes this new concept of administration will
bring in relationships beyond the local situation are not so easy to
discern; the possibilities on this level, however, seem to be the more
challenging.

Present structures

The vagueness with which the average Jesuit conceives his re-
lationship to a nationwide system of schools is based primarily on
the fact that whatever organization does exist on the national level
is in the practical order subordinate to provincial structures. Seldom,

1 See the summary presented in the Jesuit Educational Quarterly 27 (1965)
if ever, does the Jesuit teacher have direct or personal contact with the national organization. And within the province the relationship of the individual’s school to the province secondary education system is generally not in terms of direct contacts with other schools. Rather, the primary relationship, founded on a certain legal structure, is with the provincial administration and only indirectly, through this authority, with the other schools of the province. The new Constitution of the Jesuit Educational Association concentrates almost exclusively on establishing relationships among administrators and makes little provision for interchange or cooperation among the teachers of the various provinces. Frequently, the outside influences experienced by the majority of the faculty do not extend beyond provincial boundaries.

It is not surprising that this type of relationship (individual school to central province authority) has tended to restrict the power of change and redirection to one source. Innovation and initiative have similarly been exercised mainly by the same centralized administration, not because the vast numbers in the schools were deliberately excluded from contributing new ideas, but because the structure was such that there was little opportunity for exchange of ideas and little hope that such ideas would prove effective. The occasional conference with the province prefect of studies was not enough to convince the great majority of teachers that they were being called upon to participate creatively in the decision-making process. As a result, most were content to assume an attitude of passivity rather than participation, the attitude which the structure seemed to demand. The defects of such a system are clear when we consider the talent, and many times the exceptional talent, of the men who staff our schools; we must also recognize that their creative activity, the key to the renewal of the system as well as their own self-renewal, was effectively, if unintentionally, allowed to lie dormant.

An administrative framework where the power to innovate is held outside the individual school has also given a strange direction to the relationship of our schools with the educational enterprises which surround them. Jesuit schools, though frequently located in

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large urban areas, often operate in virtual isolation from the local network of school systems. Satisfied to accept changes and direction from a source outside their locale, there appears to be little reason to venture into or explore public, diocesan, or private educational systems. Yet we must ask how much the individual Jesuit school has forfeited by not participating in and responding to the extensive and varied programs of these rapidly improving school systems. Likewise, in areas where we ourselves had little to gain from other schools, we must consider how much has been lost to the educational level of the community and to the Society's educational apostolate by our failure to share the experience and values of the Jesuit tradition.

In his letter to the fathers of the French schools, Father General remarks that the first condition for renewal in our schools is openness to the forces which are developing around us. Father General also proposes that we view our schools as cultural centers which radiate the ideals of the Society beyond the limits of the individual school. Such suggestions voice a realization of our need to search out what is valuable in the communities we serve, as well as a desire to extend the impact of our educational apostolate beyond the relatively small numbers who attend our schools. But such suggestions also demand a school which can maintain close and dynamic interaction with its community and spontaneously adapt itself to local needs and opportunities.

Effective decentralization

The situation just described is, in many ways, a thing of the past. Alert administrators have in many instances evolved new structures, e.g., permanent province committees in subject areas, to take advantage of the training and experience of their men. But the danger still exists that this type of change will prove unsuccessful if all effective power to initiate or experiment with new programs remains centralized, and if a desire for uniformity continues to restrict a school's more spontaneous response to its needs and capabilities. Recently the superintendent of a large Eastern city commented that four new public schools in his system would not be tightly controlled by the central office, but would be encouraged to experiment and

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develop programs and courses independently with only a general guidance by the superintendent and his staff. The objective was not uniformity but the best program a school could devise by adapting itself to the needs of its students and the abilities of its faculty.

It is not suggested that each Jesuit high school be allowed to develop in isolation, a procedure which would be disastrous. But it is suggested that the situation in which there is only one source capable of initiating change be changed so that each school becomes a source of creative experimentation and innovation. Our failure to do this in the past betrays a basic, if unconscious, lack of trust in the personnel of the individual school, a lack of confidence which has denied many capable people the opportunity to rise responsibly to a challenge which should be theirs.

In a report of the National Study of High School English Programs entitled “A School for All Seasons,” James R. Squire, one of the directors of the nationwide English study, observed that the project’s research team seldom found the quality of instruction or intellectual tone of a school in a multiple-school arrangement even approaching the quality of the single high school program. Dr. Squire condemned administrative decisions which become detached from the classroom and yet are decisions which directly and seriously affect classroom teaching. The team of researchers concluded that the progress and vigor of a school’s English program would be maintained only if the real decisions were made in each school, by each English faculty, involving every English teacher. It seems legitimate to suggest that the findings of this committee bear parallel application to Jesuit high schools and that the effects of decisions detached from the classroom are as detrimental in other subjects as they are in English. With Dr. Squire, Jesuit schools must question whether uniformity and system-wide efficiency are to be awarded priority over the smooth and creative operation of the individual classroom teacher. John W. Gardner has remarked that we frequently have a mistaken notion of efficiency, which sees pluralistic approaches as wasteful. Though he readily admits that organizations must function efficiently to survive, Gardner also argues that “some tolerance for inconsistencies, for profusion of purposes and strategies, and for conflict is the price of freedom
and vitality." In the long run the administrative structure which
keeps the school and its faculty vigorous and creative is bound to
be the most efficient and productive.

New relationships among Jesuit schools

If steps were taken to grant increased autonomy to the individual
school, a new relationship could be developed among Jesuit schools
of a particular province as well as with the other schools of our
national system. Lines of communication within a province, which
serve a limited purpose when all look to a centralized authority for
specific direction, would have to be expanded and made more
effective. Schools would be able and expected to share the results of
their successes and failures as well as to learn from experimentation
taking place in other schools. The role of province-wide admin-
istration in this situation would be to provide the “facilitating
process,” to encourage and actively aid the individual school to
develop as effectively and imaginatively as possible. The general
administrative authority could operate in much the same manner
as the central office of a school system—supplying general guidance,
acting as a source of information and coordination, providing a range
of special services which are beyond the resources of any individual
school.

The same approach could be taken to share the ideas and exper-
ences of Jesuit schools on a national or regional basis. The failure
of the Jesuit classroom teacher to profit from or even to be aware
of what is happening in the schools of other provinces and some-
times even the schools of his own province) is perhaps something
that would most astound the outside observer. And with the excep-
tion of administrators’ participation in the JEA or an occasional
institute, it would be difficult to point to serious efforts on our part
to explore the magnitude and variety of our Jesuit high school
“system.” The joint announcement last fall by a Jesuit university

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4 John W. Gardner, *Self-Renewal: The Individual and the Innovative So-
5 An imaginative and concrete proposal on how ideas can be shared and
lines of communication established on a national level is presented elsewhere
in this review: William J. Kerr, S.J., “A Proposal for a National Consultative
Association for Jesuit Secondary Schools.”
and a Jesuit high school of a program to combine and accelerate the normal high school-college course is only one example of the wealth of educational opportunities our system holds for those who have the courage and imagination to explore it. And who can deny that the possibilities and advantages of a national system of fifty secondary schools working together with our twenty-eight colleges and universities is not open to more creative exploitation than has been attempted in the past?

New structure for new demands

New and pressing challenges are placing heavy demands upon the Jesuit high school apostolate. The rapidly increasing complexity of every aspect of secondary education is forcing abandonment of the outmoded concept of the authoritarian administrator who is an expert in every field. Initiative and freedom for experimentation, together with the power for decisive action, must be shifted to the classroom teacher or groups of teachers working together. Outside the individual school, administrative structures which have sufficed in the past are now being strained by pressures and situations they were never intended to handle. The effective updating of non-Jesuit education does not permit Jesuit schools the luxury of squandering any of their resources. New procedures must be evolved to discover and stimulate the creative potential of each teacher. Individual schools must be encouraged to take advantage of as well as contribute to the educational environment of their communities. The operation of provincial administrative offices must be re-examined and perhaps modified; redistribution of areas of authority must be considered and the services and coordination supplied to province schools by the central office must be revitalized and extended. Effective lines of communication must be established to place the classroom teacher in contact with the imaginative ideas of other Jesuit schools and educators. The concept of Jesuit high schools as a national body must be sharpened and this powerful instrument, placed uniquely in the hands of the American Society, must be exploited to full advantage. In a word, the meaning of a Jesuit high school system, its relationships and structures, must be re-evaluated and redefined.

Yet it would be foolish to imagine that changing a few patterns of authority will have an immediate or decisive effect. Modification
of the present structure to focus on and give full play to our extensive and varied resources must be a step in the right direction; ultimate change, however, will come only through the slow evolution of new attitudes, attitudes which will come with greater difficulty to the classroom teacher than to the administrator. Whatever the process, new challenges in American secondary education must not find us unaware of the demands placed upon us or unwilling to evolve new structures to meet these demands.