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Responses from the Field

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RESPONSES FROM THE FIELD

In an effort to encourage dialogue and reflection on matters of common concern and interest, we invite responses on selected articles from other educators, who engage the text critically and offer some reflections about its utility and validity.

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DeFiore (2006) provides a comprehensive review of elements that have shaped the state of special education in Catholic schools. The article speaks of the bishops' vision without teeth and the theoretical support provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA). DeFiore discusses the demand for services that are not met

because of a lack of resources, expertise, and funding. The article concludes by allowing that much has occurred over the past decade, but more is needed. To meet this need, DeFiore states that diocesan and local leaders must face the challenge of inspiring the laity to respond to this need with the necessary enthusiasm.

We believe that high quality special education comes out of a culture of inclusiveness and is not impacted as greatly by resources as DeFiore and others would suggest. The focus on the inequities in funding between public and private schools often provides an opportunity to justify the inability to provide services for children with special needs. In truth, special education is mandated but not fully funded in public schools as well. At the time that the original special education act, Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, was signed into law, President Ford warned that the mandates would far exceed the allocated resources. His hope was that Congress would revise the law to be more realistic before it was enacted in 1978. These revisions never happened and the mandates of the law continue to exceed the funding (Freedman, Bisbicos, Jentz, & Orenstein, 2005).

The pockets of excellent practice that are evident in many Catholic schools demonstrate that Catholic school teachers and administrators can develop an attitude of inclusiveness as well as problem-solving models that allow excellent programming and accommodations to develop in settings that are not funded adequately. For example, Dayton Catholic Elementary School serves an at-risk population in an urban setting without adequate funding for children with special needs. The teachers and administrator have worked hard to develop the skills needed to make accommodations for all children in their school. They have a well-established intervention assistance team that provides support for the child, the teacher, and the parents as all stakeholders work together to educate the children in the school. This problem-solving model and emphasis on the notion that all children can learn has led to a climate of learning and acceptance.

Change substantive enough to provide all children in Catholic schools an appropriate education, necessitates a reexamination of the historical diocesan parish school structure. In our opinion, the moral mandate to serve all Catholic students is a matter of designing an educational system that accommodates all. Under the current structure of diocesan parish schools, DeFiore clearly articulates that this is not probable. A united national Church effort, like the one outlined by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in their 2005 document is needed. Leaders from education, business, the community, as well as the Committee on Education of the USCCB and the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA), given the mandate to envision a system and a resource structure for meeting the moral

responsibility to the Church to provide appropriate education for all of its members would be a first step in changing the current fragmented approach to serving students with disabilities in Catholic schools.

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