



The Transformative Journey of a | Phyllis Cavallone | Two-Time National Blue Ribbon School

I arrived in 2004 and immediately found something very special at St. Therese Chinese Catholic School, located in Chicago's Chinatown neighborhood. From its humble beginnings as a mission school, St. Therese helped Chinese children adjust and adapt to American life within the framework of a Catholic education. St. Therese was a gem in the making. Unfortunately, similar to many inner-city Catholic schools, St. Therese looked to be on the path to closure. It was facing low enrollment, a crumbling building and mounting debt. This was not going to be an easy task. I didn't know everything, but I did possess the desire to learn about the community and to care for them deeply.

Whatever the steps would be, the approach to transforming the school

needed to be *mindful*. I quickly learned that a Catholic school principal wears many hats, but the most essential and necessary is the ability to lead a school community with unwavering compassion.

The first step was to identify the core of what we do as a school. It centered around our faith, mission and vision. I asked our stakeholders, which included the board, parents and teachers, to reexamine the mission and vision statement. We retooled it to match our current reality. It focused our future work together.

What followed was being more mindful about *finances*. We identified how grants and fundraising could be used more effectively in obtaining and

maintaining solvency. All fundraising needed to align to our school's mission. Aligning school commitments further strengthened the mission with financial solvency. We identified and obtained multiple sources of non-tuition income and aligned funding priorities with donors and grants, all of which pointed back to the mission of our school.

The next step was developing master teachers. How else could we ignite the classroom to create an environment of lifelong learners? Investing in our teachers helps them remain excited about learning and creates a stimulating, rich and joyous learning environment. I aspired to be a teachers' principal and recognized that fostering teachers' inherent love of learning helps





develop master teachers and teacher leaders within the school. St. Therese's professional development initiatives resulted in both immediate and long-term impact on student achievement.

We are early adopters of best practices through professional development and classroom exchanges. Teachers attend workshops at Harvard, Northwestern and Erikson Institute, and conferences on topics ranging from the growth mindset to Project Zero and technology in the classroom. Faculty and staff share their professional development and classroom experiences at faculty and team meetings to elevate the advancement of all staff. Exchanges with educators in England, Singapore, China and South Korea further broaden our practice.

St. Therese's Family Association, school board, parish and faculty meetings provide opportunities to listen, be heard and be respected. Best practices are used in staff and team meetings, the "I notice" and "I wonder" protocol is used for feedback, positive intentions are assumed and staff put away personal

electronic devices during meetings in order to be fully present. Stakeholders come together to dialogue, evaluate policy or practice and share learning. The investments come back to us tenfold!

Identifying teacher leaders and supporting their development are also crucial to the future of the school. Early on, I identified my successor, Lisa Deborah Oi, who worked tirelessly alongside me and proudly took the reins when I recently moved to the archdiocesan office.

Of course, it is hard to imagine changing a school without mentioning our students. Children are at the heart of what we do. Taking time each day to foster student relationships is essential. Students need to know that above all else, we are their advocates. We must learn how to nurture relationships with our students in order for each to feel valued and empowered.

As educators, we must connect with parents – our partners in this journey. This may not always be an easy task, and sometimes is quite complicated. There are many conversations that hold great

value with parents. Brief encounters are often just as important as more formal sit-downs. Many meetings evolve into parents sharing the many trials and tribulations of raising children in this very complex world.

While parents, teachers and principals may not always agree on every decision or policy, parents should always feel that, at the end of the day, we in the school are an extension of them. We partner with our parents in creating caring, well-rounded citizens of the world.

It is easy to get inundated by the many mandatory forms, district obligations, surveys, budgets, meetings, emails – *oh, the emails* – and the rest, but in order to really transform a school, a principal must find a balance between all of the *obligatory requirements* and find a way to nurture and foster creativity and innovation. Checking off boxes of mastery skills does not motivate our children or develop a love of learning. We need to remember to create child-centered learning spaces by igniting the classroom.

I am proud to be a part of the "transformative" journey of St. Therese. We have created a beautiful school where all children can reach their greatest potential. Since our first National Blue Ribbon in 2011, we have furthered improved our curriculum, resources and community connections. Ethnic and socioeconomic diversity has also increased through an open admissions policy, accepting students without regard to academic ability or financial status. We proudly received our second National Blue Ribbon in 2018, knowing that we have built a school that continues to strive for ongoing excellence.

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