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Cultures of Care

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A COE-led program for Catholic school teachers fills the social-emotional learning gap at underserved schools

Cultures of Care

Teaching always involves a certain amount of stress to juggle the myriad demands of students, family members and administrative requirements. During these challenging times of pandemic and social unrest, it has become even more stressful and complex.

The Department of Counseling and Special Education and Office of Innovative Professional Learning (OIPL) are working with 20 Catholic K–12 schools in Chicago to provide educators training in social-emotional learning (SEL) and wellness. Sister Mary Paul McCaughey, O.P., the archdiocese's former superintendent of schools and a COE faculty member, and Barbara Rieckhoff, associate dean and former Catholic school principal, helped OIPL connect the dots to launch the program.

Named COR (Catholic Outreach and Resources and Latin for "heart"), the initiative began as an OIPL microcredential program. The schools are located in low-income, under-resourced communities where emotional support services may be lacking.

"Catholic schools, in general, don't have as many counseling and mental health resources as they need or deserve," says OIPL Director Donna Kiel, a former Catholic school principal and counselor.

"They have limited funds to hire a counselor. For many principals, it's often the choice, 'Do I have a counselor, or do I have an art teacher?'"

Emphasizing the importance of social-emotional well-being along with academic rigor is critical, says Melissa Ockerman, associate professor of counseling.

"There's been such a focus on academics and testing," she says. "But if people are not well, including teachers who suffer a lot of vicarious trauma and carry this weight if there aren't counselors to do the work, we find ourselves in a difficult situation."

Teachers undergo training in online learning modules that detail the five pillars of SEL competency—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making—as well as trauma-informed teaching aligned with Catholic values.

Modules are tailored so teachers can incorporate them into their work. Teachers also receive personalized coaching by counseling faculty, including Ockerman and associate professors Alexandra Novakovic and Rebecca Michel, and two alumni and former winners of National School Counselor of the Year awards, Brian Coleman (MEd '14) and Kirsten Perry (MEd '11), as well as school counselor and



Sister Mary Paul McCaughey, O.P., helped launch the COR program.

licensed professional counselor Brea Adams (MEd '11).

"The modules focus on the teacher first," says Kiel. "They ask, 'Am I self-aware?' 'How am I working through whatever stress I might have, and how do I impart that with my students?' 'How can my coach help me with those questions that will guide me to the deepest level of practical self-awareness on a regular basis?'" Tools are provided to help teachers implement what they learn.

Ultimately, Kiel and Ockerman hope the program can be expanded throughout the more than 200 archdiocese schools. Success will also depend on creating permanent SEL task forces in each school that transform communities into cultures of care.

"We want them to look at certain data and ask, 'What are our discipline practices? How are we training our teachers? What kind of professional development do we offer?'" says Ockerman. "We're hitting on all levels—individual teachers, students and the full school—to make this change sustainable."



Donna Kiel taught a pre-pandemic workshop on social-emotional learning for Catholic school educators.