

The Classroom Learning Lab

By Kelly Laster





Photos courtesy of Diocese of Austin

The challenges of teacher retention can be felt in schools all over the country, whether they are Catholic, public, or charter. In the Diocese of Austin, we are tackling this challenge by infusing collaboration and support through the Classroom Learning Lab. The Classroom Learning Lab (CLL) brings a cohort of teachers together each year to observe each other's teaching, self-reflect on their instructional practices, and participate in collegial discussions as a reminder that we are not alone as Catholic school educators.

Classroom observations are usually reserved for evaluative purposes by a teacher's direct supervisor. But what if you had the opportunity to observe other teachers' classrooms and have them observe your classroom without the pressure of evaluation? The CLL was designed to promote a sense of wonder and curiosity for teachers who are interested in exploring the craft of teaching outside of the normal evaluation process. Each CLL cohort is designed for six to eight teachers and meets once a month for four months in late fall and winter.

A typical learning lab day begins with the cohort praying together and then listening to the individual goals of the two teachers who will play hosts to the group for the day. A member of the office of Catholic schools meets with each teacher the week before he or she hosts a lesson. This meeting is designed to help each teacher explore an area of instructional practice that they have always been interested in but have not tried before. We hope that teachers feel safe to create goals that stretch their current practices. As each host teacher begins their lesson, the other teachers in the cohort observe and reflect on their own practices. What do I see around the craft of teaching? What do I notice around student learning? What questions do I have?

After each classroom observation, the teachers have time to journal and reflect on their own practices. The day's session ends with robust conversations about these



questions and reflections that teachers have contemplated throughout the day. The goal of these conversations is not to evaluate each teacher's instruction but to promote and extend the instruction. Each cohort has a variety of teachers who teach any subject from PreK to AP Chemistry. No matter how diverse the subject expertise might be, the focus on the craft of teaching is what brings the teachers together in discussion.

Many of our Catholic schools in the Diocese of Austin have only one or two teachers per grade level, so the opportunity for conversations around instructional practices with partners can be challenging to find. Carving out time for conversations around the craft of teaching is even rarer but crucial to the success and confidence of every teacher. Providing an atmosphere where these conversations can happen more often can promote collegiality and inclusiveness among teachers and reduce the feeling of isolation so many teachers experience.

Self-reflection is a powerful tool for teachers to wonder and explore within their own teaching gifts and talents. A guided set of questions, time to reflect, and time to discuss with others can help teachers build the necessary skills needed to self-reflect in a positive and healthy way. The most fascinating aspect of the Diocese of Austin's CLL is to experience the dichotomy of a silent, peaceful reflection exercise with an animated, excited discussion about instructional practices. Embracing this gift and love of teaching, which has been given to us by the Great Teacher, Jesus, is what Catholic school teaching is all about.

The CLL began during the 2022-2023 school year, born from an idea borrowed from the Diocese of Grand Rapids. Since 2022, all but one teacher from the CLL cohorts are still teaching in the Diocese of Austin. While teacher retention was not the original goal of the lab, the office of Catholic schools has recognized the benefit of the learning lab in supporting teacher retention. Teachers who have gone through the CLL have created new friendships and additional support networks that help them feel connected to our larger Catholic school community in central Texas.

The CLL is celebrating its fourth anniversary during the 2025-2026 school year. The experiences of participants and facilitators have allowed it to grow and flourish so it can meet the needs of its teachers. The logistics of the lab can be worked out if the participants have time to observe, reflect, and discuss. No school is "too far away" from the others, and no subject area is "too different" than any other. Lunch arrangements can always be accommodated, and carpools can bring out a camaraderie that lasts well beyond the school year. Catholic school teachers flourish when they have tailored support and opportunities for collegial interaction. The Classroom Learning Lab is designed to ensure both of those needs are met for teachers' gifts to shine in the service of our Catholic school students.



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