As Catholic schools struggle with sagging enrollments, shifting demographic trends and innovations have challenged Catholic schools to enroll previously untapped populations such as Hispanic students and/or students with diverse learning needs. At the same time, the increased focus on National Standards and Benchmarks has instilled a desire to clarify a school’s charism and mission, which often impels these Catholic schools to embrace these very same populations.

As schools open their doors to these new students, accessibility becomes the central issue — in terms of finances, but also curriculum and instruction. It turns out that both populations (Hispanics and students with diverse learning needs), have similar accessibility issues, as well as similar solutions to those needs. We would like to challenge school leaders and classroom teachers to open their doors a little wider. We will present easy-to-implement (and inexpensive!) strategies to make your classrooms and schools more accessible.

Boston College scholar Dr. Martin Scanlan has argued that bringing previously marginalized students into the center of our schools, either through designing two-way immersion schools or inclusive education programs, is the call and mission of our Catholic schools. In his latest article in International Studies in Catholic Education, Scanlan points out, “Students experience a wide array of special needs, from diagnosed disabilities to cultural and linguistic barriers to traumas. Schools around the world and across public and private sectors struggle to provide optimal opportunities to learn for students experiencing special needs.” Scanlan has been a leading advocate for increasing accessibility of Catholic schools to Hispanic students and students with diverse learning needs.

The American Bishops have spoken out in favor of making Catholic schools financially accessible to all students. Their 2005 statement makes this clear: “It is the responsibility of the entire Catholic community — bishops, priests, deacons, religious and laity — to continue to strive towards the goal of making our Catholic elementary and secondary schools available, accessible and affordable to all Catholic parents and their children, including those who are poor and middle class.” (Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium). Recent developments such as Boston College’s National Summit on Catholic Schools & Hispanic Families (2016) have raised awareness of the need to serve the burgeoning Hispanic population (e.g., 12 million school-aged Catholics of Hispanic descent). Grassroots efforts such as the National Catholic Board on Full Inclusion have raised awareness of the need for improving our efforts to serve students with special needs.

This year, Dr. Michael Boyle of the Greeley Center at Loyola University Chicago and Dr. Pam Bernard of NCEA published a white paper outlining how schools and school systems can support the efforts of inclusion. The authors effectively outlined the challenges and solutions on four levels: national, diocesan, school and classroom. Our focus is on the classroom and school levels in supporting the skills and dispositions necessary for schools to become more accessible.

In our experiences as diocesan superintendents and college professors, we often don’t find overt opposition to enrolling more Hispanic or special needs students. The more subtle opposition takes the form of the phrase, “...but we don’t have the resources to serve the students.” Many fear that meeting the cultural, emotional, and/or intellectual needs of these populations is cost-prohibitive. “The financial risks are too great,” argue these schools. We believe not embracing these populations presents the greater risk. They will provide students, yes, but more importantly, they will provide a clear mission focus for your school and a diverse and rich educational experience for all students. Without embracing these populations, you risk making your school irrelevant.
We offer the following low-cost suggestions to meet the needs of both Hispanic and a diverse learner population:

1. Write it Out- Since Hispanic students may have difficulty processing language and students with diverse needs may have difficulty processing content, one simple way to help both is by writing it out. Pictures and diagrams can also support this strategy, especially with difficult concepts. This means instructions, classroom procedures, schedules, difficult concepts, etc., should be written out on the board to the maximum extent possible. Labeling of classroom items, desks, whiteboard, flag, etc., would assist in making connections with language while graphic organizers, guided notes and other priming activities would help students maximize their learning.

2. Incorporate More Group Work- Engaging learners is the key to any classroom, and research is telling us that this occurs by teachers becoming facilitators rather than simply dispensers of information. Both Hispanic students and students with special needs need more opportunities to practice language and social skills development. Small group activity lends itself to this and can accomplish both, as it can be more personal and a lower risk to these learners. The “guide on the side” as opposed to the “sage on the stage” will promote the personalization of learning required by these populations.

3. Cultural Reciprocity- It is important to recognize that although we all were created in God’s image, that does not mean we will all look, think or learn in the same way. Neither should we be instructed in standard ways. We should attempt to individualize learning for all students. Kalyanpur and Harry (2012) speak about a process of becoming aware and understanding the subtle, deep-seated values in our professional beliefs and practice so that we can explain them to families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds who might not share these same values. In other words, we all have a story and we all come from different places. This cannot be emphasized in isolation during a Hispanic Heritage Month or a Diverse Learners Week. It needs to be cultivated throughout the year by activities that promote equity for both. Take the time to learn the basics of where a child comes from — exactly, not “somewhere in South or Central America.” This tells the student that you respect him or her enough to ask. Additionally, learn how to pronounce his/her name correctly. Remind the students that everyone learns differently and at a different pace, but most importantly, that “different does not mean wrong.”

4. Leverage Technology- Apps such as “Newsela” offer current events articles on multiple reading levels. In fact, changing reading levels is becoming easier and easier through technology. Even an app like “Be My Eyes,” which allows a sighted student to help a student with visual impairments in real time, has tremendous implications for assistance.

5. Grow Your Instructional & Leadership Capacity- Serving Hispanic students or students with diverse needs (or both) requires teachers and administrators who have experience with or a mindset/disposition to working with these students. To that end, once the school has identified these teachers, specialized professional development can be implemented to assist the teachers with meeting the needs of these populations. Boyle (2016) posits that at the classroom level, schools should provide professional development in the areas of knowledge, skills and dispositions for working with students with diverse needs.

Our experience has shown that integrating Hispanic and diverse learning populations into Catholic schools does not require a significant financial outlay. If a school commits to personalized learning, adopts a variety of instructional practices and signals an openness to welcoming new populations, the transition will be smooth. If a school commits to articulate (or rearticulate) its purpose, it will find the value in becoming a more welcoming school accessible to all. Additionally, while that school is in that process, enrollment might grow. We are a ministry of the church, after all, and serving more of God’s people should be our goal.