

Evangelization in Public Schools

by Brian Kissinger

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges facing youth ministry in Northern Virginia is the hectic pace of life that our teens are immersed in. Involvement in sports, music, drama, and a host of other extra-curricular activities coupled with demanding workloads at school, these teens lead busy lives. Often we find our youth ministry programs competing with these other pressing demands in their lives, and it is simply impossible for many teens to attend our regularly-scheduled events. Contact work, or reaching teens beyond the walls of the parish buildings, is an absolute necessity in effective youth ministry.

This kind of ministry is not just important to reach the teenagers that do not attend our meetings; it is also a key component of serving those teens that are already involved in our ministry. As Pope John Paul II said, “If the Church holds back from the culture, the Gospel itself falls silent.” For our ministry to be relational, as Christ’s own ministry was, it is essential that we are present in the lives of the teens in our parish, not just those that show up for a youth ministry event. One of the greatest opportunities to engage the teen culture is in the public school system. Building a presence within the public school system must begin with building relationships with key stakeholders in the school.



Here are a few suggestions for establishing a presence in the public schools:

- 1. PRAY.** The most important thing we can do is to ask God to open doors and hearts. Pray for the Principal by name, pray for the teens that you know at that school, ask God for “divine appointments” and opportunities to reach out to new kids.
- 2. Talk to the teens at the school to find out who your allies are.** It is really helpful to learn ahead of time if there are any Catholics or other Christians that are on the faculty, staff, or administration of the school. It is also important to find out if there are any Christian organizations or clubs at the school that are already meeting regularly. Sometimes the advisors or moderators for these clubs can be your biggest supporters as you begin to build a presence in the school.
- 3. Stop by the school to set up a meeting with the Principal.** It is important that you stop by the school to arrange the meeting, as Principals are very busy and voicemails just don’t get the immediate response that a personal visit will elicit. This meeting is key toward establishing a relationship with the administration, and assuring the Principal that you want to offer your support to the school. This is where it is important to already have connected with teachers and staff at the school, as you can reference these connections when meeting the Principal. Assure the Principal that you want to support the teens of your parish, to offer a positive influence on their lives, and this will go a long way in gaining his/her trust.

4. **Establish regular opportunities for outreach at the school.** This depends greatly on the willingness of the Principal to give you access to the school, and this may begin with you assisting in the Christian Bible Study or some similar group. If the Principal seems open, it would be a great opportunity to ask if you could visit your teens at lunch regularly. It's important to let him/her know that your sole intention is to support and catch up with the students that belong to your parish, let the Principal know that you are not going to lunch to proselytize or baptize any students in the school water fountain. Another possibility within the school is to set up a weekly Bible study or prayer group, possibly meeting in the morning before school. You would need to find a teacher who will let you meet in their classroom, and students are usually pretty aware of any teachers that might be Christian or Catholic in the school.

5. **Show up.** One of the best things you can do to further your relationships with the students is to just be present in their lives. Your presence at the students' activities will have greater impact than you will ever know. Attendance at games, matches, meets, recitals, concerts, and performances also serves to extend the reach of your ministry. This will also offer both parents and school administration an opportunity to see your investment in the teens. *Even if the Principal, administration, and staff won't let you in the school, you still have an opportunity to be present to students.*

Youth ministers must be willing to reach beyond the parish buildings to reach teens for the Gospel. Our parish youth ministries must be incarnational and deeply invested in the lives of the teens we serve. There is certainly a great deal of comfort lost when we walk out of our offices and into a cafeteria filled with teens wondering why we're there. If we are honest, there is still an element of anxiety as we awkwardly walk from table to table, praying that we will see some teens that we know and hoping that those teens will admit to knowing us.

But as we know, the Gospel is always worth the cost.

Brian Kissinger has been the Coordinator for Youth Ministry at Saint Mary of Sorrows Catholic Church in Fairfax, VA since 2007. Brian does not like cats.