

**In the Heartland
With Bishop Pates
January, 2012
“Catholic Schools – A Great Blessing”**

Along with the rest of the nation, the Diocese of Des Moines is celebrating Catholic Schools Week, January 29 – February 5. The theme this year is *Catholic Schools – Faith.Academics.Service.*

Since becoming Bishop of Des Moines, I continually grow in my appreciation which the 15 grade schools, 2 high schools and one college, Mercy College of Health Sciences, are to our diocesan community.

This appreciation is obviously shared. Since 2003 our aggregate enrollment has grown from 6,189 to 6,476 at the 17 grade and high schools. Mercy College has grown by 217 students. These growth statistics buck the regional and national trends. Why? I contend the reasons are several.

The first is the commitment to Catholic character of our schools. In our diocese we owe an enormous debt to the women religious who, with fervent dedication over scores of years, established this foundation in identity by dedicating their lives in order that the Spirit of Jesus and our Catholic Church might permeate our schools. The baton has now passed to a fresh generation. Engaging this responsibility today is typically a team in each institution constituted by the pastor, associate pastors and chaplains, along with the school’s administration and the entire faculty and staff.

Like their predecessors, each member of today’s school team brings a faith and acceptance of one’s role as a part of the Body of Christ to the school community which mission they make their own. The outcome is a culture characterized by faith and charity incorporating Catholic traditions and especially the sacramental and prayer life of our Church.

Naturally, the quality of religious instruction is vital. Conveying insight that it is applicable to daily life is essential. Our schools have always sought to be faithful to Church teaching. Two recent developments have been of assistance in this regard. All of the religion textbooks in our schools (and in our parishes’ faith formation programs) are expected to be in conformity with the Catechism of the Catholic Church. A second assistance is that the scope and sequence of the teaching materials have been organized in a curriculum framework that, if our students are attentive, the texts provide an organized understanding of the Catholic Church and its faith by the end of high school.

One area in which our schools have been particularly successful is that of academics. Almost without qualification they are first rate. The standardized test scores exceed, on average, their counterparts in other educational settings by two or three points. Since 2003, in the state of Iowa 43 schools (both public and private) have been accorded the

prestigious national distinction “Blue Ribbon Schools.” Four of them are from the Diocese of Des Moines: Dowling Catholic High School, Sacred Heart, Holy Trinity, and St. Augustin. To attain this ranking requires considerable effort by an individual school. It is well worth it, I believe, since it pushes that particular school to a new level of institutional excellence. Our schools also strive to keep current with instructional technology to assist in addressing the different approaches of learners.

The students in our Catholic schools exercise great energy and take pride in their co-curricular activities. They consistently rank high in drama, music, debate, dancing and other arenas of competition. Team spirit contributes much to this success as is indicated by the Girls Cross County team of Dowling Catholic. Team members have been champions in the state the last five years. And the small but scrappy St. Albert football team is always in the midst of the championship mix.

Contributing to the ongoing growth of our schools is the intentional effort of marketing the product. The most effective manner is by word of mouth as the parents at St. Malachy School in Creston have so effectively proven. In addition, the diocesan Schools Board and the Schools Office are active in highlighting the values of our schools throughout the community as well as being of assistance to individual schools. The Diocesan Marketing Committee and Darcie Tallman, marketing specialist, of the Schools Office, have been recognized nationally for a creative direct mail campaign for children ages 1-5. One essential piece in the future growth of our schools is the welcoming and including of the burgeoning Hispanic population with which our diocese is richly blessed.

An area that requires constant attention is that of finances so that our Catholic schools are affordable for all parents who want their children to be students in them. To the great credit of the parishes and especially our pastors, there is remarkable commitment via parish subsidies that represent generosity, sacrifice and recognition of the value of Catholic schools. A second source of funds is tax credits, strategically provided for by the state of Iowa. A 65 percent tax credit is granted to donors who contribute to organizations who provide scholarships to students at non-public schools. In the Diocese of Des Moines, this is the Catholic Tuition Organization or CTO. The donation also qualifies for a federal tax deduction meaning that 90 percent of the donation has tax benefits. In each of the last few years this program has provided scholarships approaching \$2,000,000.00 for students in diocesan Catholic schools. For more information for both scholarship recipients and donors see: www.ctodsmdiocese.org.

The diocese conducts a fundraising campaign for scholarships to our Catholic schools in January known as “Project Hope.” Its purpose is to assist those families who might have short-term needs or who have experienced an unexpected setback or whose situation has fallen through the cracks. I encourage your generosity to “Project Hope.”

On the college/university level, two programs are worthy of our attention. Mercy College of Health Sciences which is a branch of Mercy Health Corporate Family, provides quality education in the health sciences from its flagship Nursing Programs to a Bachelor of Science in Health Sciences along with other programs in allied health fields.

The board, faculty and staff under the leadership of Barbara Decker, its President, and Brian Tingleff, its Vice President of External Affairs, have been conscientious in enhancing the Catholic identity of Mercy College as it successfully accomplishes its mission. This can be seen in its attentive implementation of the “Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services.”

Also, contributing significantly to the faith life of university students is St. Catherine of Siena Catholic Student Center, Drake Newman Community. Building on the accomplishments of his priest predecessors, Father Joel McNeil oversees a growing and thriving program that serves the student needs of Drake University through its multiple programs. Particularly noteworthy are four recent university graduates who lead the FOCUS (Fellowship of Catholic University Students) initiative at Drake Newman Community. They are pure gift to the students they serve. More information about Drake Newman Community can be found at www.newmanconnection.com.

In his three years in service to Drake collegians, Father McNeil has also pulled together a diocesan-wide corps that is seeking to establish ongoing Catholic presence at the 10 institutions of higher learning in the 23 counties of Southwest Iowa constituting the Diocese of Des Moines. It is a highly valued undertaking given the decisive character for many in this age range regarding lifelong faith and value decisions.

As we celebrate Catholic Schools Week in the Diocese of Des Moines, there is much to be proud of and especially much to be grateful for. As always, gratitude is owed in the first place to Divine Providence, which has inspired and guided our Catholic schools in achieving a remarkable impact in Southwest Iowa.