

**January
In the Heartland**

**Catholic Education
Looking to the Future**

**By Bishop Richard Pates
Bishop of Des Moines**

The history of the Catholic Church in the United States attributes much of its institutional strength to its schools. They have taken relatively uneducated wave after wave of immigrants and transformed them into productive citizens ever so loyal to the best of American ideals.

This tradition of excellent education and formation in a religious and solidly ethical base continues on for second, third and fourth generation Catholics. At the core of the schools' success were selfless religious women and men and the unwavering commitment of our parishes, dioceses and religious orders.

To this very day, the Diocese of Des Moines benefits enormously from the activity of our Catholic Schools. Only profound gratitude can adequately express the indebtedness we owe to those who have sacrificed and contributed so much and continue to do so in service to this enterprise

Our 17 diocesan schools with their enrollment of 6,222 students today play a critical role in the evangelization and catechetical mission of the contemporary church. One of the significant changes that has occurred in the last fifty or sixty years is the involvement of religious men and women. Where they are still present in limited numbers, these committed men and women exercise a powerful influence. At the same time, the administration and educational components in our schools have been essentially assumed by talented and committed lay persons.

Our diocesan schools are yet strong, productive, innovative and committed to supporting the development of students who are Christian disciples. The witness of these young people is critical in a highly secular society.

While we are grateful for all that Catholic schools have been and continue to be we cannot rest on our laurels. It is only logical that we assess strengths and challenges and develop a strategic plan that will enable them to continue the pursuit of excellence for decades to come.

The Diocese of Des Moines with the foregoing objective in mind in March, 2018 undertook a study in conjunction with an advisory firm, Meitler, which specializes in such initiatives. The goal of the undertaking was “A Vision for Excellence in Catholic Education Inspired by a Caring, Committed, Faithful Community.”

Leading the study from the diocesan community are Dr. Tracy Bonday, Diocesan Superintendent of Schools and Dr. Jerry Deegan, former President of Dowling Catholic High School. They are joined by a 24 member Blue-Ribbon Task Force representing stakeholders from all categories in diocesan Catholic schools.

The work of the study has been to gather extensive data, engage in widespread consultation with stakeholders, do an objective analysis of strengths and challenges and to begin developing components of a vision that will guide our school operations for the next twenty to thirty years. It is anticipated that a preliminary draft of a strategic plan will likely emerge in the March timeframe.

Preliminary dimensions of the vision are beginning to emerge:

- 1) Commitment to a strengthened Catholic identity. Included in this plan are three considerations in the goal of “making disciples.”
 - a. Engagement and involvement of parents in a partnership of religious education;

- b. Ongoing spiritual development of teachers, staff and coaches through *Faith Journey* in order to establish an environment which allows a faith illumined by the Gospel to flourish.
 - c. Utilization of well-developed texts and materials which convey Catholic teaching and moral standards.
- 2) Developing a more systematized diocesan participation in the schools' operations. This is required from almost every perspective but especially from financial, enrollment, and academic viewpoints.
- 3) Continued development of academic excellence. The schools will use formative and summative assessments for data-driven decisions on instruction.
- 4) Finances

In keeping with committing availability of Catholic education to all families in our diocesan community, financial structures need to be in place to make this possible.

Emerging elements in such a plan:

- a. Provide financial assistance and scholarships on a need basis through a diocesan delivery system.
- b. Seek financial aid through State of Iowa support. Presently, Catholic schools subsidize the State's responsibility for education. Suggested vehicles for state participation:
 - i. Catholic Tuition Organization. Today 3,000,000 dollars are distributed to students in our Catholic schools on a need basis. Donors to the organization benefit from state tax credits.
 - ii. Educational Savings Accounts. This is an active proposal in the state legislature whereby parents would be granted the state's appropriation for each student and utilize the grant at the school of choice.

The proposed plan also addresses additional topics, namely – governance and leadership, operational vitality which includes enrollment proposals.

I am excited and optimistic about the progress of the schools' study thus far. I believe a version will eventually emerge that will set us on a pathway that will both insure and enhance the essential mission of Catholic schools in the Diocese of Des Moines.

Further information of the study may be obtained from:

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