



Growing DISCIPLES

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EMPOWERED BY ESAs: ONE STUDENT'S JOURNEY

When Crystal Irey and her husband began exploring a new school for their fifth-grade daughter, she wasn't sure a Catholic school could meet her child's complex needs. Her daughter has PANDAS/PANS—a rare neuropsychiatric condition triggered by infections—and requires constant monitoring and an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

At St. Luke the Evangelist Catholic School in Ankeny, Irey found a collaborative team ready to support their daughter from day one. The team at St. Luke was already familiar with the condition and quickly implemented a health notification process to help Irey monitor potential exposure to infections that could trigger her daughter's symptoms.

St. Luke also worked closely with Abbie Grove Elementary, a public school that partners with private institutions to deliver IEP services. The coordination between the two schools has resulted in more consistent and personalized support.

That responsiveness and partnership were exactly what Irey was seeking—and she's grateful for the financial assistance provided by Iowa's Education Savings Accounts (ESAs). ESAs provide families with public funds to help pay for tuition, fees and other covered expenses at accredited nonpublic schools in Iowa.



"I was completely against the ESAs when they came out because I just felt like public money should be for public schools," said Irey, who works in the public sector. "It helped me see the other side of things and how ESAs could be beneficial to not only our family but other families."

For Irey, ESAs offered their family critical financial support during a time of transition. While she probably would've chosen St. Luke regardless – because her daughter's well-being comes first – ESAs allowed her to choose St. Luke without taking on additional financial stress.

The move has had a measurable impact on her daughter's confidence and academic engagement. Though Irey isn't Catholic, her family has felt welcomed at St. Luke and appreciates the values-based environment.

"Our only regret is not doing it sooner," she said.

Starting in the 2025–2026 school year, all K–12 students in Iowa will be eligible for ESA funds—no matter their family's income. These funds help families choose the school that's the best fit for their child. Learn more and apply by June 30 at ESAsForIowa.org.

HONOREES AND KEYNOTE SPEAKER ANNOUNCED FOR BISHOP'S CELEBRATION

For more than 150 years, Catholic schools in the Diocese of Des Moines have shaped lives through faith, academic excellence and a commitment to service. This year's event, held on Saturday, September 13, will continue that tradition while raising critical funds to support the diverse learning needs of students across our schools.

During the event, the diocese will honor exceptional individuals dedicated to Catholic education. This year's honorees include:

Administrator of the Year

Dr. Erica Arnold, Dowling Catholic

Teacher of the Year

Cindy Schwery, Shelby County Catholic School

Volunteer of the Year

Tomas Munoz, Holy Trinity Catholic School

Honorary Chairs

The Loffredo Family: Four generations of Catholic education

The event will feature keynote speaker Brandy L. Ficek, M.D., M.B.A., a leader in palliative medicine and proud graduate of Saint Albert Catholic.

Palliative care is specialized medical care for people living with a serious illness. It focuses on pain and symptom management as well as the emotional and spiritual challenges of the illness—regardless of the diagnosis or stage of treatment.



Brandy Ficek, M.D., MBA, Keynote Speaker

The goal is to improve quality of life for both the patient and their family through compassionate, team-based support.

Dr. Ficek credits her Catholic education as the foundation of her compassionate, purpose-driven career. She currently serves as Medical Director of Palliative Medicine & Supportive Care and Clinical Bioethics at Stormont Vail Health in Topeka, Kansas, and has helped shape palliative care policy across the state. Recognized as the Top Doctor (Phoenix Magazine), Most Influential Millennials (Arizona Business Magazine) and Ethics Champion (Center for Practical Bioethics), Dr. Ficek's story demonstrates how Catholic education can form leaders who bring light and healing into the world.

Join us for an unforgettable evening of faith, fellowship and celebration as we recognize those who make our Catholic schools so special. Your support ensures that every learner in our schools has the opportunity to thrive.

[Reserve your tickets](#) today. For more information or to get involved in this year's event, email jshama@dmdioocese.org.



Tomas Munoz, Volunteer of the Year Honoree and Donna Bishop, Superintendent of Schools

STUDENTS LEAD BY FAITH AT ST. PATRICK

At St. Patrick Catholic School in Perry, eighth graders aren't just learning about their faith—they're leading it. Twice a year, they plan and lead schoolwide prayer retreats, helping younger students grow in faith while developing leadership skills of their own.

The retreats are a key part of the eighth grade religion curriculum, designed to prepare students to live and share their faith as they transition to public high school.

"They learn to teach, lead and share their faith in a meaningful way," said Ashley Taylor, eighth grade religion teacher. "It's about becoming confident disciples."

Eighth graders design theme-based lessons and activities for various age groups. One recent retreat featured stations where students taught saintly virtues, led meditations, made friendship bracelets, and helped kindergarteners count Hail Marys. The retreats culminate in a schoolwide "human rosary" in the gym.

Students create lesson plans, collaborate with teachers and quickly learn the demands of leading a classroom. The experience benefits everyone—eighth graders gain confidence and purpose, younger students look up to peer role models, and the entire school community deepens its shared faith.

"Being at this school doesn't just mean you're Catholic," said Taylor. "It means you love Jesus and you're learning about Him—together."



BLESSINGS TO OUR 2025 GRADUATES

This May across the diocese, 435 eighth-grade students earned their diplomas, ready to carry the values of faith, service and academic excellence with them into high school. At Dowling Catholic High School and Saint Albert Catholic School, 364 seniors crossed the graduation stage, prepared to live out their faith and leadership in the wider world.

Together, our graduating seniors earned an impressive \$11.6 million in college scholarships, a testament to their hard work, determination and the support of their families and educators. 97 percent of these graduates plan to continue their education in the fall, pursuing a wide range of academic and vocational paths.

From their earliest school days to graduation, these students have grown as scholars and disciples, prepared to lead lives of purpose and compassion.

On behalf of Bishop William Joensen, Superintendent Donna Bishop, and the entire Catholic Schools Office, we offer our warmest congratulations.

May the peace of Christ be with you always. We are so proud of you. God bless the Class of 2025!

WHY SCHOOL ACCREDITATION MATTERS

Accreditation is more than a badge of honor—it reflects a commitment to effective teaching, a well-rounded learning environment, and curriculum alignment with state and national benchmarks. For families, accreditation provides a sense of security and trust, knowing their children will benefit from an education that meets recognized standards of excellence.

Schools become accredited through a rigorous process that signals that a school is meeting or exceeding state Department of Education standards for academic quality, curriculum, staffing and student services. These standards hold schools accountable for ongoing improvement and ensure consistency across the state. The accreditation process promotes continuous improvement to assess key areas like curriculum quality, faculty qualifications, student outcomes and the overall school environment.

Every school in the [Diocese of Des Moines](#) is accredited by the state of Iowa, consistently meeting or surpassing rigorous educational standards. One-third of diocesan schools have earned the prestigious Blue Ribbon Schools of Excellence designation from the U.S. Department of Education, a national recognition for schools demonstrating outstanding academic achievement. In addition, two diocesan schools – Holy Trinity and Dowling Catholic – have been honored by Solution Tree as Model Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) at Work®—a distinction reserved for schools that show sustained success in improving student outcomes through a culture of collaboration, data-informed decision-making and continuous improvement.



"I am so very proud of all of our diocesan schools for their pursuit of continuous improvement, innovation, and growth that empowers students to maximize their potential and use their gifts to serve God and others," said Donna Bishop, superintendent of schools. "Blue Ribbon designation is just one way in which our schools are recognized for their fidelity to excellence in education."

Accreditation plays a critical role in implementing [Education Savings Accounts](#) (ESAs), a program that has expanded school choice in Iowa. ESAs allow public funds to follow students to schools that best meet their needs. However, schools must be accredited in order to accept ESA funds. By tying ESAs to accreditation, Iowa can ensure public funds are used responsibly while upholding the values of excellence and accountability in education.

Accreditation ensures more than academic quality—it affirms a school's mission to form students in faith, character, and excellence. In the Diocese of Des Moines, this commitment is lived out every day in classrooms where students are known, supported, and challenged to grow. To learn more about accreditation visit educate.iowa.gov.

DIOCESAN SCHOOL BOARD REINSTITATED

The Diocese of Des Moines Catholic Schools is proud to announce the re-institution of the Diocesan School Board. This renewed board brings together a cross-section of our school community, including diocesan leadership, clergy, educators and parents.

A key focus will be aligning school improvement efforts with the [National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools](#) (NSBECS). As a national, research-based framework, the NSBECS define what effective Catholic schools look like and provide a roadmap for achieving and sustaining excellence. They encompass four domains: Mission and Catholic Identity, Governance and Leadership, Academic Excellence, and Operational Vitality.

In the coming year, the Diocesan School Board will use the NSBECS to guide strategic planning, accreditation, and internal reviews. This approach will provide each school with a clear, actionable path for continuous improvement and ensure our schools uphold consistent values of faith formation and educational excellence.

Through this collaborative and mission-driven leadership, the diocese strives to provide all its students with a Catholic education that prepares them for lives of faith, service, and success.

BOARD MEMBERS

Diocesan Staff: Bishop Joensen, Bob Larson, Sue McEntee, Donna Bishop, Denise Mulcahy

Pastors: Fr. Pins and Fr. Siepker

Deacon: Dn. Jim Houston

Parents: Kari Hernandez (St. Anthony), Rachael Seymour (St. Theresa), Leslie Wurster (St. Malachy), Kelly Stearns (St. Luke), Matt Finnegan (St. Albert), Sarah Noland (Homeschool)

Teacher: Joe Tallman (St. Pius X)

Administrators: Monica Morrison (Holy Trinity), Matt Meendering (Dowling)

CELEBRATING FIVE YEARS OF GROWTH

For the fifth consecutive year, the Diocese of Des Moines Catholic Schools have experienced significant enrollment growth—welcoming more than 730 additional students since 2021. This sustained momentum reflects the confidence families have in the faith-centered, high-quality education offered by our 16 schools. It also reflects a commitment to forming students in mind, body and spirit—preparing them not only for academic success, but for lives of purpose as disciples of Christ.



DIOCESE OF DES MOINES WINS STATE RELIGION BEE

Congratulations to the Diocese of Des Moines Religion Bee team—this year's state champions! Representing Saint Albert, St. Augustin, St. Anthony, St. Luke and St. Pius X, these outstanding students claimed first place in the statewide competition held on Friday, May 2. The event tested deep knowledge of Church history, Scripture, and Catholic tradition. With challenging questions like identifying "The Smiling Pope" and key biblical patriarchs, the competition was fierce. Congratulations to all our students who participated!

DIOCESE OF DES MOINES CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

The Diocese of Des Moines Catholic Schools includes 16 schools serving 23 counties in central and southwest Iowa. Catholic schools in the Des Moines Diocese build Christ-centered, collaborative, inclusive partnerships with parents, students, and parishes to provide innovative academic excellence and inspirational faith formation. To learn more about the Diocese of Des Moines Catholic Schools, visit dmdiocese.org/catholic-schools or email grow@dmdiocese.org.

Growing Disciples is a quarterly publication of the Diocese of Des Moines Catholic Schools Office. Content may not be reproduced without the expressed written consent from the Diocese of Des Moines. To submit a story idea, email grow@dmdiocese.org.



Sacred Heart, West Des Moines

First graders and eighth graders pose with student-crafted Ferris wheels, made using K'Nex in the school's Makerspace – a creative, DIY space where students can gather to create, invent, and learn.

DIOCESE OF DES MOINES CATHOLIC SCHOOLS OFFICE

601 Grand Avenue . Des Moines, IA 50309 . 515.243.7653



CATHOLIC SCHOOLS
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