

# GROWING DISCIPLES



## A Handful of Popcorn: Generosity Measured by Love



Dr. Brandy Ficek, M.D., M.B.A., a graduate of Saint Albert Catholic School, delivers the keynote address at the 2025 Bishop's Celebration of Catholic Schools on Saturday, September 13, 2025, at the Diocese of Des Moines Pastoral Center in Des Moines.

*Dr. Brandy L. Ficek, M.D., M.B.A., is not only a nationally recognized leader in palliative medicine but also a proud product of our own diocese. She's been named "Top Doctor," "Most Influential Millennial," and "Ethics Champion." A 2000 graduate of Saint Albert Catholic High School, Dr. Ficek credits her Catholic school upbringing as foundational to the successful as the physician she is today.*

*Dr. Ficek was invited to be the guest speaker during the 2025 Bishop's Celebration of Catholic Schools at the Diocese of Des Moines Pastoral Center, where*

*she delivered the following speech to a crowd of educators and supporters of Catholic schools.*



Not too long ago, my family and I were at the Iowa Heartlanders Hockey game as they helped to sponsor a fundraiser for our

non-profit, Love from Levi. And at our table, we had samples of the interactive books we customize to help young children facing serious illness better understand and feel comfortable with their procedures.

While there, a young boy, probably only 5 or 6 years old, came up with his father right before the start of the game. And I'll never forget how big his eyes got as he was looking through the book and asked, "you give these to little kids who are sick?" We nodded and explained the different pages to him. He then noticed our donation jar and asked his father if he could give money to us. But, his father politely smiled and noted that he didn't have any cash on him and understandably looked like he was ready to get back to their seats to avoid missing the face-off.

But that little boy was undeterred, so he looked around and then reached into the bag of popcorn they were taking back to their seats and placed a handful of kernels in front of us. "Will this help?" Just a small handful of popcorn. That was his gift. That was his sacrifice. That was his faith that what little he had could still make a difference...

[Read the full speech on dmdiocese.org.](https://dmdiocese.org)

PHOTOS

2025 Bishop’s Celebration Raises \$20K for Diverse Learners

This year’s Bishop’s Celebration of Catholic Schools brought together more than 200 supporters, staff, and volunteers on September 13 at the Pastoral Center in Des Moines.

Our many sponsors and donors contributed \$32,453.42 to this event, which netted more than \$20,000 to support the needs of diverse learners within our schools.

Speaking of alums, there are 49 priests in the Diocese of Des Moines who attended one of our Catholic schools, and we were able to honor those in attendance for the first time.

As always, representatives from all 16 Catholic schools in our diocese attended the fifth annual event to celebrate these centers of educational excellence.

A highlight of the night was the powerful keynote from Dr. Brandy Ficek, a Saint Albert alum, who spoke about how the smallest gifts can have the biggest impact.

We also honored Teacher of the Year Cindy Schwery (Shelby County Catholic School), Administrator of the Year Erica Arnold (Dowling Catholic High School), and Volunteer of the Year Tomas Muñoz (Holy Trinity Catholic School).

Save the date to join us next year on October 10, 2026!



ABOVE: Bishop William Joensen shares a laugh with the family of 2025 Volunteer of Year Tomas Muñoz (Holy Trinity Catholic School).



ABOVE LEFT: Priest alumni of Diocese of Des Moines Catholic Schools deliver a blessing to attendees of the 2025 Bishop’s Celebration of Catholic Schools. ABOVE RIGHT: Bishop William Joensen poses with 2025 Teacher of the Year Cindy Schwery (Shelby County Catholic School). TOP RIGHT: Bishop Joensen delivers a message to 2025 Bishop’s Celebration attendees. BOTTOM RIGHT: 2025 Administrator of the Year Erica Arnold poses with her colleagues from Dowling Catholic High School.



# Keychain Connections: St. Luke Students Bond with School in Ghana



Fr. Ryan Andrew (St. Luke the Evangelist Catholic School) visits students at St. Luke's sister school, Fr. James Browne Memorial School, in July 2025 in the village of Zwarungu, Ghana.

It started with three simple beads on a string. Seventh graders at St. Luke the Evangelist in Ankeny crafted keychains—green for their school, blue for a school in Ghana they had never seen, and black to bind them together. They sent them off with a prayer, unaware they were launching a movement.

When photos returned weeks later showing students at Fr. James Browne Memorial School beaming with joy over these small gifts, it sparked a connection that has since transformed two communities.

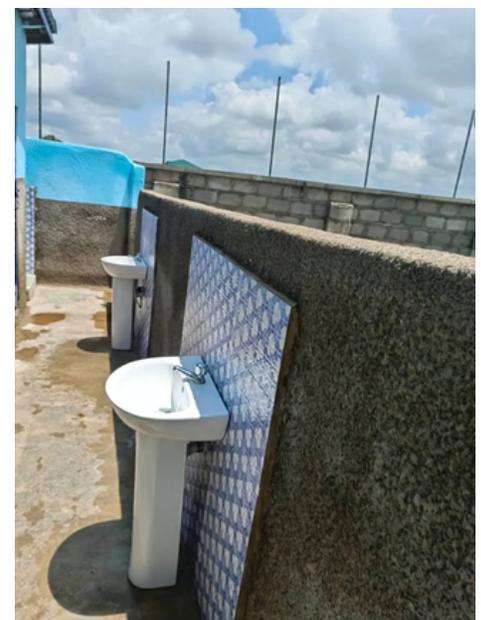
What began with trinkets and WhatsApp messages between priests has blossomed into a powerful sister parish relationship. The partnership

quickly moved to address dignity and safety. A single mission day in Iowa raised enough funds to replace the Ghanaian school's primitive sanitation trenches with proper bathrooms. A new security wall now protects the students from traffic. Since then, enrollment has grown from 170 to 192 students.

But the transformation isn't one-sided. When St. Luke parishioners traveled to Ghana, the abstract became personal. They discovered that while they provided material aid, the Ghanaian community offered something equally valuable: a vibrant, palpable example of joy and generosity despite having little. As Fr. Ryan Andrew noted, "Both parishes are missionaries to each other."



TOP: Keychains created by St. Luke the Evangelist students were sent to students at Fr. James Browne Memorial School in Ghana. BOTTOM: St. Luke parishioners helped fund and construct bathroom facilities and a security wall at their sister school.



[Read the full story on dmdiocese.org.](https://dmdiocese.org)

# 2026-2027 Applications Being Accepted at Nearly All DoDM Schools

Priority enrollment for active, registered parishioners in the Des Moines metro is now open, and enrollment will be opened to everyone on Jan. 10.

Saint Albert, St. Malachy, St. Patrick, and Shelby County

Catholic Schools will open enrollment to everyone during Catholic Schools Week (Jan. 25-31).

The best way to start your application is by scheduling a tour.

Call your school of choice or visit their website to schedule your tour.

Address questions about application and enrollment to the Catholic Schools Office at [dmdiocese.org/schools](http://dmdiocese.org/schools).

# Still Time to Earn 2025 Tax Credit, Help Students Attend Catholic School

In January, the Catholic Tuition Organization (CTO) Office fielded calls from donors wondering where their tax certificates were for 2024.

Unfortunately they forgot to make a gift before the end of the year – and didn't receive a certificate.

Even more frustrating, donors last year waited too late into December to make a gift of stock, and the transaction wasn't completed until early January, also missing the deadline for 2024.

Don't let this happen to you.

Uncertain if you've already made a gift? Pick up the telephone and call CTO to verify – 515-237-5010.

Planning a year end gift of appreciated stock? Start the process by December 15 to



**CTO**  
CATHOLIC TUITION  
ORGANIZATION

avoid an interruption to your holiday or vacation plans by others getting in the way of your transaction.

Call CTO to keep watch for your gift's arrival. They'll give you a quick call when it arrives or warn you if they haven't seen it as the clock ticks down, so you can follow up.

Gifts made in calendar year 2025 create the opportunities for families meeting federal poverty guidelines to remain in or begin attending Catholic schools in the Diocese of Des Moines for the 2026-27 school year. Your gift now makes a significant difference in the lives of these families.

For the current school year, CTO is directing donor contributions to assist 1,900+ students attending one of our 16 Catholic schools. To qualify, families must be below 400% of the federal poverty limit.

Donors in 2025 will qualify for a 75% Iowa tax credit for the value of their donation. Donors may designate 75% of their gift to one or more of the schools that means the most to them.

Visit [www.CTOiowa.org](http://www.CTOiowa.org) to make a gift today. Gifts of grain and livestock are also accepted, but a call to the CTO Office to confirm arrangements is appreciated.

For more information on CTO tuition grants or donating, contact Brian Tingleff, Director at 515-237-5010 or [btingleff@dmdiocese.org](mailto:btingleff@dmdiocese.org).

# Catholic Schools Office's 2024-2025 Annual Report Available to Download

The Diocese of Des Moines Catholic Schools Office just published our 2024-2025 Annual Report.

Centered on last year's theme, "Cultivating Connections in Christ," this report highlights a year of significant growth and spiritual achievement across our 16 schools.

Our sacred mission to educate the whole child—mind, body, and spirit—is flourishing. Highlights include the success of Faith Families, 2.1% enrollment growth, and another year of exceptional scores on the Iowa Statewide Assessment of Student Progress (ISASP).

The average cost to educate was \$10,048 per student in PS-8 schools, yet the average tuition before assistance was \$5,379 (including the parishioner subsidy). The average cost to educate in high school was \$14,260, with tuition before assistance of \$9,394, so we are incredibly grateful to the parishes and donors who make Catholic education possible.

Please take a few minutes to read the report, celebrate a year of success, and see the enduring value of Catholic education in our diocese.



[Download the report on dmdiocese.org.](https://dmdiocese.org)

# Diocese of Des Moines Catholic Schools

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/schools](http://dmdiocese.org/schools) or email [grow@dmdiocese.org](mailto: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](mailto:grow@dmdiocese.org).



Fourth graders at St. Joseph Catholic School in Des Moines led their school's 2025 All Saints Day Mass, then shared their Saints Wax Museum back at school. Guided by Miss O'Connor, they researched and dressed as their saint and delivered excellent presentations.

**DIOCESE OF DES MOINES CATHOLIC SCHOOLS OFFICE**

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