

A NEW APPROACH FOR A STRONGER FUTURE

K-12 Catholic Schools in the Des Moines Metropolitan Area

INTRODUCTION

Catholic schools are a critical element in fulfilling the evangelizing mission of the Catholic Church. However, it is imperative that we examine how schools operate and are funded to ensure their long-term success. The complexities of running schools and the immense cost to sustain an exceptional Catholic education raises the need to consider changes in the approach for educating and forming students.

The metropolitan area of Des Moines has 11 Catholic elementary schools with enrollment of 3,808 and one Catholic high school with enrollment of 1,406 for school year 2018-2019. Each school is an individual entity supported by one or more parishes, all pursuing a similar mission to the same population. There are parishes with families of school-age children not supporting schools. Many challenges face schools now and into the future. It is time to look seriously at how working together versus individually might produce better results given these challenges.

THE CASE FOR CHANGE

The current realities:

- a. Enrollment has been slightly declining over the years. From 2012 to 2018, enrollment in K-8th grade dropped 212 students or 6.4% not counting St. Luke in Ankeny and not counting prekindergarten enrollment. St. Luke is an exception, being a new school and adding a new grade each year. Prekindergarten masks the real challenge.
- b. The 11 elementary schools in the Des Moines metro have 862 empty seats. There are six schools where enrollment is 53% to 80% of the capacity for which the school is staffed. This reduces class size but significantly increases the cost to educate students in these schools.
- c. Catholic schools receive \$6.55 million annually in support from parishes. This investment is not being strategically used to keep schools at the highest quality and fully enrolled. A new approach to funding brought about in a coordinated way will lead to long-term sustainability.

What could schools do together that provides advantages to the institutions, students and their families? The Blue-Ribbon Task Force has identified the following areas as benefitting from a cooperative approach:

1. Branding/marketing (including strategic communications to inform, inspire and engage)
2. Setting tuition and changing funding model
3. Funding tuition assistance
4. Fundraising/major gift initiatives/planned giving/endowments
5. Transforming teacher/administrator compensation with equity for all schools
6. Training and supporting school boards for strong governance
7. An aligned K-12 academic program creating accelerated and advanced paths for students
8. Continually exploring innovative and relevant academic programs
9. Enhancing professional development
10. Technology expertise, technical and instructional support
11. Purchasing curriculum, technology, etc.

OUTLINE OF A NEW APPROACH

Catholic education has long been a mission of each parish, and Catholic schools have historically been established as a direct ministry of the parish. In our current time, the traditional parish model for Catholic schools is being called into question, as the model does not consistently deliver sustainable governance and adequate resources to ensure the best in Catholic education. (See *Catholic Schools Reimagined* by Betsy Shirley)

While some change can be accomplished within existing models, it will not be as transforming as a new model. A new K-12 model must fit the Diocese of Des Moines and accomplish these goals:

1. Retain the cultural and religious strengths schools already have and ensure long-term sustainability.
2. Ensure a strong Catholic identity and strong parish connection.
3. Deliver the excellence in 21st century education that parents want and can see as superior to public schools and other options. All students will graduate with even stronger academic programs across all grade levels and especially in middle school. All students will be educated in a climate that delivers excellent faith formation and preparedness for life.

The details of a new model will be continually shaped as a new approach is designed. The following is a general overview:

Catholic Identity and Faith Formation:

- Faith formation provided for all teachers/staff.
- Faith sharing and prayer is integral to school culture.
- Each school community of faith is an extension of the local parish.
- Improved faith education and serving opportunities provided.
- Staff is focused on family engagement and outreach through school programs.

Enrollment:

- Professional marketing/communications effort will be implemented with central staff to lead the way.
- Each school has an enrollment team, guided by a city-wide enrollment plan.
- Branding and marketing will be coordinated city wide.

Academics:

- Wider range of academic programs will be available to all students.
- Stronger alignment of programs with high school readiness will be implemented.
- Programs and traditions make local schools unique but will have consistency and high quality.
- Enrichment opportunities will be added for all students.
- A culture of innovation will have leadership support and necessary resources.

Governance:

- All parishes in the region share in the ownership of the schools.
- Parishes continue to support schools with the gifts and talents of parishioners as well as financial assistance.
- All schools will have advisory boards and a new regional board structure will be created under a regional system network governing model.
- The system will have an executive director and leadership team. Role of pastors and principals will be redefined within the system network.

Finance:

- Common tuition model for all schools will be implemented with a well-funded financial assistance program adopting the newly prescribed funding model for Catholic schools in the diocese.
- Significant advancement, led by professional staff at the regional level, will work with local schools and parishes to generate significant funds for school needs and financial assistance.
- Increased assistance will be provided for middle income families.
- All parishes support Catholic schools.
- Professional business practices will be a priority.

Facilities:

- Facilities owned by particular parishes will be made available to the regional system through a building use agreement that shares cost and use of space.
- A facility review of all parish school facilities will be conducted and will produce a master facility plan at each campus in harmony with local parish plans.
- A plan will be developed in collaboration with the parishes to make capital investments that will upgrade or expand facilities where needed.

In the end we want to:

- Clear message from the beginning of process, people have faith and trust that we are moving in the right direction and trust in the process
- Transition with differentiation; move forward not everything looks exactly the same but we are all together
- Move schools from subsistence existence to thriving mindset, stronger operational viability. Perception and reality of stronger/more stable Catholic schools.
- Deliver a better product - Aim higher, expect more, expect excellence. People identify and feel ownership with their school within a new system
- New level of financial support than schools can achieve on their own
- Ambassadors/champions at each parish school to communicate within their community