

# Catholic Schools

## Six Secrets of Success

*by Kathryn Ann Connelly*

Parents often ask the question, "Can I afford to send my child to a Catholic school?" My response is another question: "How can you *not* afford it?" All parents want what is best for their children and often sacrifice in order to provide it.

I know of many parents who will take on a second and sometimes even a third job to keep their youngsters in a Catholic school. One of my former associates did just this. When asked why, she simply said, "It's the right thing. Where else can I be assured that the Christian ethic that I value and cherish will be reinforced? Where else can I be assured that he will be challenged and academically prepared for a future that no one knows about yet? When he gets on that bus, I know he will be in good hands, safe and secure as can be, and I will be informed when something is amiss."

In my own career as a Catholic educator, I have learned that Catholic schooling has many other compelling advantages. I call them the "secrets of success." Here are my top six:

### **1. Catholic schools develop positive Catholic identity.**

In Catholic schools there is a culture and an identity that is distinctly religious, that is unlike any other. No one would argue that we are living in a world that is trying desperately to do without God. Yet pundits maintain that there is a desire in our society today to turn to the spiritual. The atmosphere in a Catholic school provides a sound spirituality for the students. It provides experiences and opportunities for youngsters to know that God is a very real presence in life. To experience a living spirituality is the experience of a Catholic school.

In one U.S. diocese, a sign is posted in each school, "Be it known to all who enter here that Christ is the reason for this school. He is the unseen but ever present teacher in its classrooms. He is the model of its faculty and the inspiration of its students." This quotation is prominently displayed for every parent, teacher, student and visitor.

It leaves no question as to what is central to this school. It gives parents an understanding of the value system they can expect of this school. It conveys a challenge to faculty members to take up St. Paul's invitation to "clothe yourselves with Christ" (see Gal 3:27). It gives visitors an unmistakable signal that this school is indeed a special place. It tells students the prime reason for attending the school. They are walking on holy ground: The school's mission is to help them realize Jesus Christ is present.

The Catholic identity of the school is not taken for granted, it is worked at, it is nourished, it is engaged by the students, the faculty, the community. Prayer and spirituality are not just trimmings, but are the essence and moral fiber of the school.

### **2. Catholic families want to pass on their tradition.**

Tradition means the handing on to the next generation. All families pass traditions from one generation to the next. These might be ethnic celebrations of life events or simply the way we celebrate holidays. Catholic schools ensure that the Catholic tradition is passed on to children, who are the future Church.

There is a compelling need for leadership in the Catholic Church both now and tomorrow. It is in the Catholic school that this leadership is formed and nurtured. Lay leadership as well as clergy and religious vocations are fostered.

Catholic schools are places of evangelization. They are places where children and teens are encouraged to live the gospel fearlessly today with the expectation that this will be the fabric of their future lives. The aim of the Catholic school is to make the gospel message part and parcel of the child's learning.

To be God-centered becomes second nature. That is the logic of Catholic schools. Virtuous living is preached at Sunday Mass, it's true, but that message needs reinforcement all week long. In the Catholic school, family values are supported and assistance is given to parents. Parents know their children are being not only informed, but also formed.

Leadership formation for life in parish and church is not the only aim of the Catholic school. Catholic schools are developing leaders for the entire community, in every walk of life. There are high expectations of Catholic school alumni for ethical business practice, for honorable citizenship, for civic-mindedness. Parents understand that the modeling done in the Catholic school opens the door to the future. The 21st century will be better because of the formation our young people receive in Catholic schools.

### **3. Catholic schools develop the whole person.**

The challenge to schools in an age of knowledge explosion can be met only by continuous improvement. Catholic schools have changed a lot since the middle of the 20th century. Education is no longer a static entity with a contained set of facts. Catholic schools are continually improving to keep up with the times.

A walk into a classroom today often promises an exciting and perhaps mind-boggling experience for parents—and especially for grandparents. Although many of the Catholic signs are still there—the crucifix, a statue or two, a prayer corner, gold stars and charts—there might not be a chalkboard, but instead a smart board; there might not be a teacher's desk, but instead an electronic information station.

Reading shelves are there but room has been made to house electronic discs and videos. Many times the teacher will not be found in the front of the class, but rather on the move, close to the children, sharing learning with them as well as guiding them along the paths of the knowledge-seeker.

Solid academics have always been a hallmark in Catholic schools. Excellence is the norm. Teachers are expected to teach; students are expected to learn. These expectations are met by doing more than government standards require, more than just passing tests. The Catholic school strives to equip its graduates with the best tools possible to fulfill the role of good citizen, productive and caring employee, competent professional.

Cincinnati Archbishop Daniel E. Pilarczyk, in an address to the Chief Administrators of Catholic Education, said it best when he said, "Every Catholic school is to be, first, a school, that is, where learning is paramount, where teachers are to teach, where subject matter is to be learned." This notion is reinforced throughout the Church. In 1997 the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education wrote, "The Catholic school should be able to offer young people the means to acquire knowledge they need in order to find a place in society which is strongly characterized by technical and scientific skill. But at the same time, it should be able, above all, to impart a solid Christian formation."

How do we balance our need for solid academic and technical training with developing the whole person? One teacher in a Catholic school described the key to successful schooling as similar to the business slogan: "Location, location, location." For Catholic education, though, the slogan must be, "Integration, integration, integration." It all comes down to the mix. The child is a whole being; a child's mind cannot be separated from his or her soul. To integrate the spiritual with the secular makes the student in a Catholic school a saintly scholar.

Some parents worry that Catholic schools cannot accommodate their children who have special needs. The Education Department of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, by working with the federal Department of Education, makes certain that the provisions of the legislature are inclusive of children in non-public schools. The No Child Left Behind program and the Americans With Disabilities Act are currently helping to provide financial assistance for these programs in Catholic schools.

While special education remains a challenge for the future, much progress has been made. Programs have been developed for children with special needs. More and more of these children are being served in Catholic schools.

#### **4. Children learn best in a well-disciplined setting.**

Catholic schools have been known for their discipline programs. Past graduates often have fun describing the code of conduct in the good old days. The myths of days gone by are just that: gone. Today's Catholic school continues to look beyond the curricular areas to remind children that they are responsible. Discipline has become synonymous with respect and responsibility.

Children are taught to be responsible for their own actions. In a spirit of justice and charity, youngsters are encouraged to respect themselves and their neighbor. In simple terms, the children are taught to be kind. Today's codes of discipline are codes of expectations. Of course there are violations of rules and regulations, and of course there are detentions, suspensions and expulsions. Catholic schools, however, do not expel chronically unruly children without a thorough and fair process.

While there is no way to guarantee that unfortunate incidents will never occur, Catholic school administrators across the country have taken measures to assist teachers, students and families to deal with difficult behavior such as bullying and violence. To prevent the unthinkable, security measures have been installed, ranging from surveillance cameras to lock-down codes, drills to evacuation plans and disaster rehearsals.

Children are the concern of everyone who is involved with the Catholic school. Recently, a newspaper article told the story of a janitor at a Catholic school in a neighborhood where it is commonplace for drug dealers and felons of every kind to walk the streets. He patrols the area daily to make sure "his" kids are safe. The school is not just a building, but also the place where the children know they are loved, protected and safe. They are free to learn and love each other in an atmosphere of care and concern even in a chaotic neighborhood.

In a Catholic school, students are encouraged to know and care for one another. Cruelty and bullying are met head-on to help prevent the type of isolation that can erupt into deadly violence.

#### **5. Local finance and governance make schools work.**

Who runs the school? How much parent involvement and input is there? *Stakeholders* is the term used in governance. Today the stakeholders in Catholic schools are the families who send their children and the parish that supports them. Local boards, commissions, parish and diocesan structures all depend on the engagement of laity for support and future paths.

While most Catholic schools are still operated by parishes with the help of diocesan governance, new models are emerging. These may be regional elementary schools, parish school consolidations and education centers with formal day school as well as adult education programs. There is a growing number of independent Catholic schools initiated by lay groups working with local parishes. Boards, commissions, councils have been established; a separate division at the National Catholic Educational Association is dedicated to assisting this movement of the laity to enter into parish partnerships and assume more responsibility for the well-being of the school.

Development and institutional advancement offices can be found in most areas to assist schools. They help with finances for operations as well as student aid for families who are truly in need of financial help beyond the more typical sacrifices.

At the high school level it is common now to find boards of trustees, led by school presidents who oversee school finances and free up the principal for day-to-day school operation.

The No Child Left Behind program of the federal government includes provisions for children who are in nonpublic schools. In recent times, the United States Supreme Court has legitimized vouchers to assist persons below the poverty level to make a choice for their children's education.

As costs continue to escalate, schools are finding more and more ways of providing the dollars necessary to maintain an open door for everyone. While voucher programs are beginning to take root in many states, other states are working to rid Blaine amendments (which restrict public monies) from their constitutions. Thus children will be able to receive some government-funded services in Catholic schools.

Yet the problem of financing schools remains. Keeping tuitions affordable, providing just salaries, properly equipping schools in technology and in sound educational programs remain ongoing challenges to the Church and its people.

## **6. Catholic schools are good for everyone's future.**

Catholic schools contribute greatly to the well-being of our country. They provide anchors to neighborhoods in cities, towns and suburbs. They encourage service to others. They help students assume a sense of civic responsibility; they encourage a thirst for justice and for peace.

Catholic schools respond to the needs of our society by affording a means for families to live and practice the gospel message and to follow the social teachings of the Church. Indeed, Catholic schools work to make the world a better place for all.

Dr. Lorraine A. Ozar, a leading Catholic educator from Loyola-Chicago's Center for Catholic School Effectiveness, maintains that students cannot be prepared for the content of the future. She suggests they can only be prepared "to problem-solve in the future they find and create." Catholic schools, with their attention to developing the whole person, are preparing today's children to tackle tomorrow's world with empathy and wisdom, with reflection and action.

Catholic schools' secrets of success aren't really secrets, after all. They're a practical and sensible approach to child development. Most important, they recognize that schools exist not only to teach academics, but mainly to help families educate the whole child: mind, body and spirit.

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