

Bush lauds Catholic schools initiative in Memphis

By Bartholomew Sullivan

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WASHINGTON -- President Bush spoke Thursday of the "great joy" Memphians have at the reopening of closed Catholic schools and praised the schools' leadership and local philanthropists for reversing a national trend that has closed many faith-based schools.

"With the seed money, the diocese launched the Jubilee Schools initiative, and reopened Catholic schools that had been shuttered, actually in some cases, for decades. Today, 10 Jubilee schools serve more than 1,400 students. Eighty-one percent of these children are not Catholic; nearly 96 percent live at or below poverty level," Bush said. "It's been a great joy for the people of Memphis to watch excellence spread."

Memphis Catholic Schools Supt. Mary C. McDonald was selected to meet with the president before his speech at the White House Summit on Inner-City Children and Faith-based Schools, and later spoke at the conference.

"He expressed his gratitude for what we're doing in the inner cities and the differences it's making in the children's lives," McDonald said after the president's speech. "He recognized in Memphis that we're doing something, that the Catholic Schools were doing something."

"I said, you know, I pray for you every day. And he grabbed both my hands and he said, 'Thank you so much. That's the best gift of all.'"

Participants in the daylong conference talked about the "achievement gap" among minorities that many faith-based schools are closing in their communities but also decried the number of schools that have closed in recent years, displacing more than 400,000 students.

In his speech, Bush also praised programs in the Archdioceses of Washington and Chicago and at the University of Notre Dame.

McDonald said a White House speech-writer called her perhaps 15 times through the day Wednesday seeking to verify details of the Memphis initiative and "to get a feel, a flavor of what's happening in Memphis. They were most surprised that most of the students are not Catholic and I explained that we teach the children because it's a mission of our church."



Gerald Herbert / Associated Press

President Bush hugs Washington's St. Ann's Academy student Aysia Mayo-Gray after she introduced him at the White House Summit on Inner-City Children and Faith-Based Schools, Thursday, April 24, 2008, at the Ronald Reagan Building in Washington.

In her remarks to the conference, McDonald explained how the Memphis Catholic schools seek to help whole families through job training, job placement, literacy programs and other skills development. She also discussed partnering with the Memphis Food Bank to permit students to take backpacks full of food home on Fridays to tide the children over for the weekend.

"In order to effect systemic change, to change the universe for these children, we had to provide a new experience, a new paradigm for education," she said. She noted the schools have a zero dropout rate and a 99.9 percent graduation rate.

In an interview, she said the schools seek to combat gangs by giving students a sense of belonging to their schools.

"It's not enough just to educate the child. We have to lift up the whole family," she said.

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President's remarks

Here are excerpts from the official White House transcript of the president's remarks about the Memphis Jubilee Schools:

I was struck by an interesting story that came out of Memphis, Tennessee. Ten years ago private donors gave approximately \$15 million to the church in Memphis to help revive Catholic schools in the city's poorest neighborhoods -- assets exist -- they're worried about them going away, so rather than just watch schools close, somebody -- individuals did something about it by putting up \$15 million.

With the seed money, the diocese launched the Jubilee Schools initiative. ...

With the help from Jubilee scholarship donors, tuition becomes whatever the family can afford. And the schools happen to be working, as well, which is really important. The program -- and the reason I can tell you is because test scores are up, they're not afraid to measure.

You've got to be a little worried in our society when somebody says, I don't think I want to measure. That's like saying, I don't want to be held to account. The problem with that line of reasoning is that when you're dealing with our children, it's unacceptable. ...

And so this school system is willing to measure, and it has been a great joy for the people of Memphis to watch excellence spread. And I want to thank those who have put forth the money, and call on all citizens to find ways they can contribute with their hearts to help educational entrepreneurs succeed.

