

Do Catholic schools have a future?

Dioceses are seeking creative ways to keep Catholic education thriving in difficult times



Mary McAleese, Superintendent of Schools for the Diocese of Memphis, greets children on a recent visit to Jubilee Schools.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE DIOCESE OF MEMPHIS

BY KERRY WEBER

Shamus Connolly and his four siblings all graduated from Our Lady of Angels School in Brooklyn, New York. So when time came for Connolly's oldest son Shamus Jr. to begin kindergarten in 2005, he and his wife Rachel looked forward to the day he would become the family's next Our Lady of Angels alum. Then they learned that day might never arrive.

Citing low enrollment, the Diocese of Brooklyn put Our Lady of Angels on its preliminary list of 14 schools slated to close at the end of the 2008-2009 school year. "We were devastated," says Rachel, 34, president of the school's parent association. But parents and staff took action. Connolly and other parents banded together. Every student committed to returning to the school. The pastor, principal, and a few others wrote a proposal extolling, among other virtues, the school's facilities and its \$500,000 scholarship endowment. Next year, the school will remain open as an independent Catholic school under the name Holy Angels Academy.

In its final proposal — a result of feedback received at dozens of meetings with educators and administrators throughout

Brooklyn — the diocese chose to close eight of its elementary schools at the end of the 2008-2009 school year. Other schools will merge, and many will gradually convert to what the diocese calls an "academy model," meaning that the school's finances will be separate from the parish's and most decisions will be made by a lay board of directors. "Most of our priests don't have MBAs, and they're running million-dollar operations," says Kieran Harrington, vicar of communica-



Students from the Archdiocese of Chicago Catholic school system celebrate spring

tions for the diocese. Harrington says the difficult decision ensures that money can be spent on the children instead of overhead, helping to keep tuition costs down.

Keeping Catholic education affordable and available to all children, especially

those in urban areas, has long been part of the mission of Catholic schools. Today, more than 40 percent of Catholic schools are located in urban and inner-city areas, though the number of suburban Catholic schools continues to increase. In a report titled, "Who Will Save America's Urban Catholic Schools?" by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a nonprofit think tank dedicated to issues of education in K-12 schools, Scott Hamilton, a distinguished visiting fellow there, argues that Catholic schools are a vital resource to inner-city neighborhoods.

"[Catholic schools] have a long and recognized tradition of educating the poor and taking the poor seriously, and by that I

mean they don't care where you're from or what your ethnicity is; they believe if you work hard and behave the right way and follow all the commandments, you'll be a success.... And that's something that a lot of public schools have struggled to do." Hamilton also sees Catholic schools as an important alternative to the public school system. "A lot [of Catholic schools] are serving kids who are non-Catholic but whose families see the emphasis on character and that their kids are taken seriously; they want the love, and the treasuring of spirituality."

But now this mission is at risk. The early 1960s saw the peak of Catholic school enrollment, with more than 5.2 million students

We've come through this before

In an online video, Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of Brooklyn reminds viewers that Catholic schools have faced plenty of challenges in the past. "The Know-Nothings (an American political group hostile to immigrants, especially Irish-Catholics) of the 19th century burned schools and blocked construction of new buildings; during the Great Depression, schools closed and new construction ceased. In the 1950s and '60s there was not enough room in our schools to accommodate all the students who wanted to benefit from a Catholic education."

What has allowed Catholic schools to endure, DiMarzio says, is their ability to maintain their vision, which he describes as "our commitment to provide our children programs of academic excellence [and] ongoing faith formation, and allowing them to grow in an environment animated by Catholic social values." See Bishop DiMarzio's videos at catholicdigest.com.



Mary McDonald, superintendent of schools for the Diocese of Memphis, joins students who were dressed as saints for an All Schools Mass

attending close to 13,000 schools, according to data by the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA). But that rate has since dropped significantly, with only about 2.25 million students enrolled in 7,378 Catholic schools.

Enrollment at urban Catholic schools has dropped by approximately 25 percent, in part because Catholic families are increasingly moving to the suburbs, where some dioceses have been slower to build new schools, says Karen Ristau, NCEA president. Rising operating costs, especially in the

current economy, have stressed the budgets of schools in urban areas, leaving less money for tuition assistance. The NCEA estimates that the cost of educating a student at a Catholic elementary school is just under \$6,000. And although the average cost of tuition is approximately half that amount, Catholic school tuition remains outside the budget for many families. Even in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Washington, D.C. — areas with voucher programs — many Catholic schools in these areas have continued to struggle.

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In spite of these challenges, many remain hopeful about the future of Catholic schools and continue to search for creative ways to ensure the survival of Catholic education.

Mergers, for instance, are a sensible solution when student numbers are low, Ristau says. "If it's done right with good planning — and good planning always involves people from both schools — then it can be a wonderful occasion, but it has to be a joint effort," she says.

Some U.S. dioceses have found new paradigms of Catholic education and have created successful new Catholic schools over the last decade. The Diocese of Memphis, for example, reopened nine inner-city schools in urban areas between 1999 and 2004, calling them Jubilee Schools.

On a visit to one of the schools, Superintendent Mary McDonald watched as a student broke his roll and meat in half, placing them in his pocket. "Don't you like the food?" McDonald

The first day of Catholic school

The first known Catholic school in the United States was founded by Franciscans in 1606 in what is now St. Augustine, Florida. Read more about the history of Catholic schools in the United States at ncea.org/about/HistoricalOverviewofCatholicSchoolsInAmerica.asp.

asked with concern. With wide eyes, the boy replied, "Yes, but I'm bringing some home to Mama." It was then that the Catholic school mission to educate the whole person — to nourish mind, body, and spirit — really hit home.

"We realized we had to restructure the way we delivered the education as well as addressed the basic needs of the children in poverty," says McDonald. "We wanted to lift the families as well as the children, so the neighborhoods would change." Funded by a trust set up by anonymous donors, the Jubilee Schools now provide meals for students and work with a food bank to send food home to families. They also provide washers and dryers for school uniforms, and they help with job placement and literacy classes for parents.

McDonald believes that solid business practices, such as consolidated purchasing among schools, shared counselors and social workers, and high levels of accountability among staff

will help to ensure that Catholic schools remain a viable option. She also believes that a Catholic environment helps all of the students — Catholic and non-Catholic — move toward success. "Our faith is the environment in which the education takes place," she says. "They love and respect the traditions and the faith, and even though they may never become Catholic, they may become better citizens and good people."

Rice High School in Harlem, New York, serves a largely non-Catholic, low-income African-American population. Author Patrick McCloskey spent a year at the school while documenting the experience of the then-principal and students in his book, *The Street Stops Here*. In the book, he also argues that Catholic schools like Rice hold students accountable for their actions and help build a strong sense of values and moral character in students who face temptations and violence on the streets of inner-city neighborhoods and in failing public schools. "Schools have always been



up against negative influences," says McCloskey, "but the question is, do they create a counterculture to fight against it?" At Rice, nearly every student graduates and most attend college, while surrounding public schools can have graduation rates of less than a third.

McCloskey argues that many U.S. churches began with poor immigrant populations, and that the Church's growth and strength lay in dignifying its members and lifting its people out of poverty. "The Church grew strong, not because it built nice churches, but because it built schools and educated generation after generation to be Catholic, and influenced other kids in the community because they were such a presence," he says.

Another diocese that has implemented a creative approach to keeping Catholic education alive is the Diocese of Wichita, where parishioners' positive response to a bishop's invitation to participate in generous stewardship has enabled Catholic schools in each diocese to refrain from charging tuition for students whose families are active registered members of a Catholic parish in the diocese. Parishioners are urged to give 8 percent of their income to

the Church and 2 percent to other charities. The money provides significant funding for the dioceses' 38 Catholic schools.

While many who hear about Wichita's success hope to duplicate it in their own diocese, the process takes more than just a financial planning session. "It's a way of living your faith, and it's a result of living your faith that produces the generous contributions [and] makes it so special," says Bob Voboril, superintendent of schools for the diocese.

All three of Charles Kissling's sons, now 25, 22, and 17, have been educated at Catholic schools in the Wichita diocese. Kissling began increasing his donations to the church even before his first son entered school, when his parish priest urged him to give generously not just of his time and talent, but of his financial resources as well. At first Kissling, 56, was doubtful that he could afford it, but he decided to try his best. "Our human senses said, 'We can't do this,' but our faith said, 'We can,'" Kissling says. He and his family increased their donations each year until they gave at a level they considered appropriate to help maintain the Catholic schools in their diocese. And though they were giving more money than ever before,

Kissling says they didn't miss it, and that the benefits to both the school and the parish have been tremendous. "The

school gets not only the financial support of the parish but the general support of that parish," he says. "The parental involvement is high because parents

are involved not only financially but emotionally, and it's not only parents but all the parishioners who support the school. And the parish gets more involved kids. The students become more involved in giving their talents to the church and more volunteer-oriented."

The current recession has been a challenge for some schools and parents, however. The Chicago archdiocese has

U.S. Catholic schools BY THE NUMBERS

The regions containing the most Catholic schools are the Midwest and the Great Lakes, with 25.1% and 23.7%, respectively. These regions have also experienced the highest numbers of closures (115) over the past year.

Minority students make up 28.9 percent of Catholic school enrollment in the United States.

Non-Catholic students make up 14.1 percent of those attending Catholic schools.

During the 2007-2008 school year, 43 new Catholic schools opened; 169 consolidated or closed.

Religious and clergy comprise 4.1 percent of teachers in Catholic schools today.

88 percent of Catholics have a favorable view of Catholic schools.

■ NCEA.ORG, FORDHAM INSTITUTE

worked to release extra scholarship money for students whose parents have lost their jobs. "We care about young people and keeping them in the system," says school Superintendent Sr. M. Paul McCaughey, O.P. McCaughey is hoping that corporate tax credits, already available in some states, will soon be allowed in Illinois. These credits allow a corporation to contribute up to a certain percentage

The phone call that led me back to the faith

be more fundraising, and with the new model of governance both students and faculty will be held accountable to stricter guidelines.”

Still, Connolly knows not every Catholic school can remain open, and urges parents to continue to support Catholic education. “Don’t give up,” she says. “I was devastated when I heard the school would close, but I knew my kids would continue to thrive wherever we put them.”

Catholic schools across the country are still in fragile shape, says Ristau, but there’s hope. Instead of taking schools for granted, she says, “Now, we’re nationally waking up and we know we have to take care of our children and our schools. They’re a gem worth saving.”

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and dollar amount of taxes to a foundation from which schools — including Catholic schools — may apply for tuition assistance for young people.

There is no simple fix for schools with falling enrollment, but in Memphis, McDonald believes that the leadership in Catholic school offices needs to take the first step.

“The principals have enough to do to run them; they can’t be held accountable for raising money too,” she says. “I feel that it is incumbent on us as Catholic school offices to seek out the resources, financial and otherwise, to position our schools for success.”

In Brooklyn, Rachel Connolly believes that the threat of school closure was a wake-up call to parents at Our Lady of Angels. “It really brought the school together as a community, and the parents are more supportive and involved,” she says. “There will

INSIGHTFUL LANDLORD

A neurotic is the person who builds a castle in the air. A psychotic is the person who lives in it. And a psychiatrist is the person who collects the rent.

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I grew up in a small New Mexican town where it seemed everyone but me was Catholic. On spring Fridays, I ate fish or beans in the school cafeteria listening to my classmates discuss what they were giving up for Lent.

In third grade, my mother took me to a neighbor’s wedding at Our Lady of Belen. Though the outside of the old church looked as though it would crumble with the next wind, the statues of Mary and Joseph stood strong and straight inside. As I looked up at the gold-trimmed balcony where a baritone sang “Oh sing a song of love,” I was sure that the Catholics had recreated the heavenly kingdom on Earth.

A new church had been constructed by the time I was engaged, and since my fiancé was Catholic, I agreed to be married there and later, because it was important to my in-laws,

to have our daughter baptized in the faith. Years later, after their son and I divorced and I was living in a small town in Kentucky, they asked — in their Christ-led way — if I would make sure their grandchild received her sacraments. I made the call and as I waited for the priest to answer, I wondered which sin would provoke more wrath: my divorce or my spiritual negligence.

To my surprise, he was very accepting. Grateful, I mentioned that I had often thought about converting but was unsure. Father Ken told me to pray about it and that I would know when the time was right. His understanding inspired me to attend Mass, even when I was overwhelmed by graduate courses or felt that I didn’t belong.

I started RCIA in 2001. The support and caring that I found at those Wednesday night meetings washed away the worry and feelings of unworthiness I had carried with me.

✦ LINDA MAXWELL

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