

## Catholic schools head Mary McDonald invests in human capital

- By [James Dowd](#)
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In Dr. Mary McDonald's compact office at the headquarters for the Catholic Diocese of Memphis, a framed motto offers this motivational nugget: "The person who says it cannot be done should not interrupt the person who is doing it."

That's a message McDonald takes literally and spiritually as she goes about the job of overseeing the educational and theological formation of thousands of young people.

As head of schools for the [Catholic Diocese of Memphis](#), McDonald serves as chief cheerleader for parochial education and tireless fundraiser for the system that operates on a \$20 million annual budget.

For her innovative approach to education and her impact on the local community, McDonald is being honored by the Society of Entrepreneurs. She will be formally inducted into the organization April 9.

"From the time I was a child I wanted to be in business, but I veered toward education at the beginning and that's where I made my career," McDonald said. "That I've ended up combining the two, education and business, is the best of all possible worlds for me."

The Philadelphia, Pa., native grew up as the only girl in a house with four brothers, an experience she said proved useful years later. She drew strength from that foundation in her early years as a teacher and in subsequent posts as she steadily climbed the educational ladder.

"Growing up with all my brothers, I had to be persistent and I learned how to communicate in order to be heard," McDonald said. "That served me well years later and helped me deal with leaders in Catholic schools throughout my career."

After moving a half-dozen times with her husband to advance his career, the family eventually settled in Memphis in 1976 and opted to stay. McDonald taught at Holy Rosary Elementary School and later at St. Agnes Academy, where she taught high school religion courses before she became principal and dean of the elementary school.

From there she became principal at St. Benedict at Auburndale, which paved the way for her current career post. In 1998, McDonald was selected to run diocesan schools, a post she has held ever since.

"She's one of the important people fighting day in and day out to improve educational opportunities for children," said Jim Pohlman, president of [Memphis Catholic High School](#). "She has a tremendous ability to see the big picture and to work tirelessly to help that vision unfold."

During McDonald's tenure, the diocese has witnessed the creation of the Jubilee Catholic Schools, which were previously closed facilities in inner-city neighborhoods that educate underprivileged children. And she instituted the "Education That Works" program at Memphis Catholic High, a work-study program that pairs students and local businesses.

In addition to numerous educational and civic honors, McDonald is an author and was the 2002 recipient of the Humanitarian of the Year Award given by the National Conference for Community and Justice, which is now [Diversity Memphis](#).

"The future of this city rests with our young people, and she's helping so many to reach their potential," said Laura Fox Ingram, Diversity Memphis executive director. "It's hard to find a better person in the world."