

ARCHDIOCESE OF CHICAGO

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CATHOLIC SCHOOLS WEEK

Why do parents, already paying stiff property taxes, take on second jobs to pay tuition so that children can be educated in a Catholic school? Why do Catholic parishes, already strapped to minister to the multiple needs of their congregations, dig deep to help subsidize parish schools? Why do community members of all faiths assist as patrons of schools and sponsors for young people for whom a Catholic education is out of reach?

Intuitively, perhaps, these stakeholders know that Catholic schools are the setting for lessons that last a lifetime, the place where head and heart meet: and the facts bear this out in the Catholic schools of Cook and Lake Counties. The 218 grade schools and 40 high schools of the Archdiocese of Chicago, rooted in faith, academic excellence, and service stand as a witness to the shared expectations of a community which invests extraordinary resources in teaching its young people.

Since Church (canon) law requires that a Catholic school provide a secular academic education that is as good - or better - than the one offered by the local public school district, test scores meet the mark in even in the most affluent suburb. In the inner city and with struggling districts, however, the gap is dramatic. Young people who graduate from a Catholic elementary school increase their chance of graduating from a public high school to 90% as opposed to the lagging general rate. For those continuing in a Catholic high school, the drop out-rate is close to zero and 96% go on to college. At opposites ends of the spectrum, Catholic universities blend scholarship with a commitment to social transformation just as the growing number of Catholic pre-school programs provide opportunities for the richness of language development and support for family systems.

However, the test scores well above the national average and the value-centered school climate are only prerequisites for Catholic school operation. The true underpinning is the transmittal of the Catholic faith. While non-Catholics are welcome (almost one in five of students in Catholic schools are from another faith tradition), recent research has shown what experience bears out: the Catholic school is the single most effective way of integrating a faith which results in personal practice for young people. In a healthy Catholic school, human dignity is seen as flowing from the recognition that each child, while a "productive citizen," is also a son or daughter of God.

Graced and called, the students of the Archdiocese of Chicago have returned over a half million hours of service to others so far this year. Even in the poorest of the schools, students are generous to those with less, both locally and internationally. The theme for Catholic Schools Week promulgated by the National Catholic Educational Association is "celebrate service." Those who choose to answer the invitations of our schools as they open their doors to the community this week will witness their vitality and sense of service.

The University of Notre Dame study of Catholic Schools ("Making God know, Loved, and Served") calls the schools a "national treasure." In the State of Illinois alone, our Catholic grade and high schools save the taxpayer over two billion dollars annually. As we celebrate Catholic Schools Week, perhaps it is time to look again at the teachers, administrators, parents, and young people who have freely made an investment in our Catholic schools - and celebrate their service to us all.

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