



Saint Paul Catholic School

# Catholic Schools Today

## Catholic Schools Today: Why They're Right for Your Child *-by Robert J. Kealey*

Why do parents spend the night outside of Catholic schools the day before school registration starts? Why do parents register their children for Catholic schools the day after the infants are baptized? Catholic schools are once again filled and many schools lack the space for new students. Over 40% of Catholic schools have waiting lists that resemble the waiting lists of the 1950's. The 1990's have seen yearly increases in the number of students in Catholic schools. All indications point to a continuation of this trend.

This growth in student enrollment has taken place despite the fact that many Catholic schools closed. Unfortunately, most closings occurred in urban areas where the Catholic population moved from the city to the suburbs leaving behind a parish too small and poor to support a school.

Many center-city Catholic schools, however, remain open. Most educators recognize that these schools are the only effective schools in urban areas. Individual parishes and dioceses have made valiant efforts to maintain urban schools even though large numbers of their students are nonCatholics.

While many schools have closed, more than 150 new Catholic schools opened during the past 10 years. Hardly a diocese in the country exists that does not have plans on the drawing boards for new schools and additions to others. Catholic parents in suburban parishes are now the prime movers behind the opening of new schools across the country.

### A look at Catholic schools

The best way to understand what is happening in our Catholic schools as we enter a new millennium is to take a good look at the following four traits:

1. Catholic identity. If your image of Catholic schools comes from the movie *The Bells of St.*

*Mary's*, you will be very surprised at them today. Formerly, most teachers were priests or members of religious communities of sisters and brothers. Today, over 92% of the Catholic educators are single or married women and men. In a Catholic elementary school the typical teacher is a married woman over 35 years of age who has been teaching in the school for over 10 years.

When this change from priests and religious to single and married women and men began, people asked, "Will the schools remain Catholic?" Today the Catholic schools continue to emphasize their Catholic identity. The priests and religious prepared their young teachers to take over the schools and keep them committed to their central mission of evangelization. Catholic school teachers know their subjects and teaching methods, have high expectations of their students and model the Christian adult.

2. Modern classroom arrangements. A second change you will notice as you visit today's Catholic schools is the instructional program. Formerly, the typical classroom had student desks lined up in neat rows. Little else was in the classroom except a blackboard. Today, the desks are usually grouped in clusters. About 20 to 35 students work in different areas in the classroom. Some students access information from the Internet. At another technology station, students e-mail students on the other side of the globe. Others watch a video. The teacher works with a small group in an instructional area near her workstation. An aide tutors one student. A few students complete assignments at their desks.

While the appearance of the schoolrooms has changed, the curriculum remains similar to what was taught 50 years ago. Catholic schools have always placed a high priority on the basics, with religion being the first of the four R's. Catholic school educators still maintain that basic informa-

tion needs to be committed to memory. Yet, emphasis is placed on understanding concepts, not just repeating rote formulas.

3. New administrative setuP. Years ago, pastors directed the schools and all aspects of the parish. Principals worked under their direction. Today, pastors oversee a variety of parish ministries. While they have ultimate responsibility, they are not the authority in every ministry. The relationship among pastors, principals and heads of other parish ministries is a peer relationship. Each person has expertise in the particular ministry but each works as part of a team.

Pastors and principals have come to rely on the talents of competent parishioners. Education committees develop the budget, approve policy and offer advice. In today's complex society, no pastor or principal is expected to know all the answers. The parishioners support the parish by the gift of their talents, which is a form of stewardship.

4. Changes in funding. Forty years ago, Catholic schools did not charge tuition or, if they did, it was very modest. The expenses of the schools were minimal largely because the sisters and brothers worked for a modest stipend. They received enough to take care of their basic needs and to send funds to the motherhouse to support the novices and the retired members of the community. Today, tuition covers almost 60% of the Catholic elementary school per-pupil cost. The parish Sunday collection contributes about 30%, and various fund-raising activities generate 10%.

### **Are they successful?**

The easiest way for me to answer this question of whether or not Catholic schools are successful is simply to suggest that you first:

Look at your own experience- if you graduated from a Catholic school. My mother went to a Catholic elementary school but did not go to high school. My father went to Catholic elementary school and Catholic high school but did not graduate from high school. Their four sons graduated from Catholic elementary and secondary schools, held executive positions and two of them have earned doctorates. Catholic schools took a largely immigrant population of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and brought that population into the mainstream of American life so that today it is one of the best educated and most successful groups in the United States.

Look at today's parents. Parents know how successful Catholic schools are. In 1997, the parents of over 23,000 children in the schools run by New York City signed their children up for a lottery in which only 2,000 of these children would be able to attend Catholic schools. Similar situations occurred in Washington, Cleveland, Milwaukee and other cities. The non-Catholic population in Catholic schools is over 13%. Parents most often indicate that the primary reasons for sending their children to Catholic schools are the schools' record of academic excellence, emphasis on values and supportive environment.

Look at research. Research studies demonstrate the effectiveness of Catholic schools and the superior performance of Catholic school students over students in state-controlled schools. The results of the 1996 National Assessment of Educational Progress Tests (most recent available) show that students in Catholic schools, who make up over 60% of the students in independent schools, outperform students in government-controlled schools in all areas. Some would claim that we cannot place too much emphasis on these scores because not all the rigors of educational research were followed. Yet the overwhelming higher achievement of Catholic school students in every subject, at every grade level and in every test-year cannot be ignored.

### **Why the success?**

Those committed to Catholic schools are convinced that our students succeed because of:

A rigorous curriculum. A Nation at Risk, a national study by the U.S. government, indicated that the country was in economic danger because of the low achievement of students in government-controlled schools. Further study showed that students were not taking the courses that their parents had taken in secondary schools. Many of the courses they were now taking had been considerably "watered down," according to this report. This was not and is not the case in Catholic schools.

Catholic schools have a very clear goal for their students. The vast majority of their students advance to college (about 94%) and graduate from college. The programs in elementary and secondary schools prepare students for this goal. Therefore, most Catholic high school students take four years of mathematics, history, English, science, foreign language, and of course religious studies. In addition, students are held to a high standard of

achievement. Class and homework assignments challenge students.

Self-discipline with a Christian focus. The emphasis placed on external discipline in Catholic schools attempts to foster self-discipline. Catholic schools seek to develop the Christlike person. Part of being Christlike requires people to accept responsibility for their actions and to respect others. The rules established in Catholic schools foster growth in the value of self-responsibility.

Catholic school students are taught to recognize the presence of Christ in themselves and others. This reverence for people permeates all aspects of school life.

To be involved in drugs, alcohol or violence is to be anti-Christ. Catholic schools are not merely "Gunfree Zones," "Drug-free Zones" or "Violence-free Zones." They seek to be "Christ-centered Zones." These attitudes hopefully will carryover into adult life so that the homes of Catholic school graduates will be "Christ-centered Homes."

High expectations. You have heard many times the famous line, "Sister said." Perhaps the most frequent thing that Sister said was, "I know you can and will succeed." The sisters expected every student to achieve. In my first year teaching, I showed my students' grades to the principal, who examined them and asked, "What did you do that four students failed mathematics?" The principal helped me to see that the students did not fail. I failed the students.

Research from many fields has shown the importance of high expectations. Not only did the sisters have high expectations of their students. They communicated this to their students, who internalized this value. This, in turn, enhanced their selfconcept. Of the many gifts that religious women have given to this country, this determination that children will learn is one of their greatest gifts. Although few religious sisters teach in Catholic schools today, their legacy of high expectations continues.

Commitment of parents. Parents are the first educators of their children in time, importance, effect, commitment and many other ways. The school serves the parents and works with them for the good of children. Catholic schools have capitalized on this concept and insisted that parents take an active part in their children's education. When par-

ents register their children, they are told the program and asked to commit themselves to work with the school. When some difficulty arises, parents are immediately contacted and asked, "What can we do together to solve this problem?"

Not only are Catholic school parents committed to their own children's education, they are committed to their schools. Each year the over 5,000,000 parents of Catholic school students provide hundreds of millions of hours of volunteer service to their schools. Parents have built schools, assisted in the office, taught classes, taken students on trips and performed hundreds of other services.

### Challenges we face

As Catholic education moves into the 21st century, special attention must be focused on these challenges:

Staffing. After the students themselves, teachers are Catholic schools' most precious assets. The Catholic identity of the school, the academic program, the modeling for the students depend upon the faculty. At one time, this was assured because large numbers of religious served on the staff. Today, many Catholic school educators graduate from state colleges and universities. As a result they lack many years of instruction in a Catholic environment.

Diocesan and national programs are addressing this. But more needs to be done and be done quickly.

Finances. Finances have been a problem from the time the first Catholic school opened in the country. Today this issue represents a two-edged sword. Catholic schools have a much lower per-pupil cost than the state schools. One reason for this is the salaries of their educators are only about half those of teachers in government schools. One of the main reasons why the salaries are so low is the desire of administrators to keep tuition down so Catholic schools remain affordable for all children. How do we solve this dilemma? The current movement to provide full and fair parental choice in education seeks to give all parents the means to send their children to the schools they know are best for them, whether they be state-controlled or independent. Catholics should become familiar with this justice issue and get involved. Finances will remain a problem for Catholic schools until elected officials respond to the call of millions of citizens to assist all parents with the education of their children. At

the same time, Catholics must increase their giving to Catholic schools as many Catholics did a few generations ago. Support for Catholic schools is the responsibility of all Catholics.

Special-needs children. You cannot read the Gospels without discovering Jesus' love for people with special needs. The history of our Church highlights saints who reached out to help those in need. Today, the Catholic Church is recognized for all its efforts to assist the disabled or the ably different. Each year, largely because of finances, Catholic schools turn away thousands of children with various forms of disabilities. A hopeful sign appears in the growing number of schools adapting their buildings and programs to enable such children to enjoy the benefits of a Catholic school. Catholic educators cannot be content until this problem is adequately addressed.

These challenges must not distract us from one of the biggest selling points for Catholic schools. **Outside sacramental programs, Catholic schools have done more for evangelization than any other American Church institution.** For over 200 years, they have been the most effective means of helping youth grow in their faith. As they face the challenges, they will continue to have a profound impact on the Catholic Church and the American nation.

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