

The End of a School Year like no Other: Looking Back and Looking Ahead

It goes without saying this year has been a school year like no other. For many kids and families, it has been incredibly frustrating and challenging, with the unknown of when schools may be open or closed, and the various pandemic adjustments that schools made as well, from the masks to the distance learning. Some kids barely had any education at all this last year.

As we all know, education matters so much so our young people do not fall behind, but grow in knowledge and preparation for life. Lost days are hard to make up. And having a 7 year old try to learn “virtually” when a parent has other kids plus their own work to attend to is in many respects like trying to herd cats. We all hope that much more “normalcy” is ahead.

However, this isn't something we can just wish for. It's something that happens through the dedication and hard work of others.

For one, this happened this past year at our parish school of Saint Joseph's. When the pandemic first began, our principal Kelly Roche, formulated a plan as we faced a shut down from mid-March through the end of the 2019-20 school year. As last summer began, it became clear many schools would not be open; some would offer a “hybrid” system at best. The Catholic Schools wanted to be different. Knowing that there is no substitute for in-person learning, Catholic Schools throughout the archdiocese were committed to opening in September of 2020.

That's when Mrs. Roche and a dedicated team leapt into action. Working hard throughout the summer, they formulated a plan to facilitate in-person learning that would allow kids to be here in school with their teachers, while at the same time trying to keep in mind health safety. And what has been the end result? An incredibly successful school year. Kids here, in person, learning, rather than being online all day. Kids being able to get outside as well for many learning opportunities where they could remove the masks and breathe some fresh air. Additionally, many new faces as well, with enrollment up sharply. This increase has resulted in a new kindergarten being planned for this upcoming fall. It wasn't easy; it was a huge effort from Mrs. Roche and the staff but we've made it and now the students are emerging from a challenging but very successful year. What a blessing our principal and teachers are - thank you so much!

As Catholics, we not only support our parish school, but believe education is so important for all kids. With this in mind, the Archdiocese is asking us to pay attention to the issue of “School Choice” and to let our elected officials know where we stand on this issue. As such, now is the time to get involved. Bishop Andrew Cozzens, in conjunction with the Minnesota Catholic Conference, recently asked all parishes to communicate to the faithful how they can do this.

They stress that the COVID pandemic has made the need for school choice more evident than ever.

According to the MCC:

When the state shut down schools last March and into the 2020-21 school year, there were limited options aside from distance learning for students in public schools. Whether it was a kindergartner learning to read, a student with a learning disability, or someone who was already struggling in school, there were very few options. Obviously this is not a good thing.

Parents and kids need access to all educational options, and personal financial barriers should not prevent students from getting the education they need. We cannot sit by idly as our children suffer from isolation and substandard education through distance learning.

There are multiple solutions on the table, and our kids need lawmakers to step up and come to an agreement that will provide real educational choice now. Whether it is tuition tax credits, or education savings accounts, urge your Senator, Representative, and Governor Walz to support school choice solutions that provide parents with financial resources to access non-public schools or to pay for tutors and supplemental educational services for students in distance and hybrid learning models.

Research shows when parents actively choose schools for their children, students are more likely to succeed in school. We cannot wait one more minute. Let's give more Minnesota students opportunities to access the school that is best for them.

Church Teaching also reaffirms this:

“As those first responsible for the education of their children, parents have the right to choose a school for them which corresponds to their own convictions. This right is fundamental. As far as possible parents have the duty of choosing schools that will best help them in their task as Christian educators. Public authorities have the duty of guaranteeing this parental right and of ensuring the concrete conditions for its exercise.” (CCC, 2229)

“The role of parents in education is of such importance that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute. The right and the duty of parents to educate their children are primordial and inalienable.” (CCC, 2221)

“Parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children.” (CCC. 2223)

With this in mind, please contact your elected officials and get involved on this issue. Learn more at mncatholic.org/action.

As we celebrated graduation Mass last week, it was a reminder to the ongoing commitment to education our parish has led by Mrs. Roche and the great teachers who serve here. Though last year was unique, one thing that wasn't was the quality of

education our students receive. What a blessing it is to have such incredible selfless dedication to the well-being of our students.

God bless!

Fr. Paul