



ARCHDIOCESE OF INDIANAPOLIS

The Church in Central and Southern Indiana

Leadership Briefing

By Archbishop Charles C. Thompson

Back to School Time Brings Special Challenges and Opportunities

As we begin another school year, it's clear that this is not a normal time. A recent article in *The Criterion* (see below), outlines many of the “challenges and hopes” facing our Catholic school communities during this time of pandemic. In this article, Mary McCoy, who now serves as Interim Superintendent of Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Indianapolis, and assistant superintendents, Rob Rash and Michelle Radomsky, outline these challenges and opportunities. As they see things, the school communities are primarily concerned with the safety of all students, faculty and staff—while, of course, continuing to provide an outstanding education with opportunities for religious formation, spiritual growth and service. School leaders affirm that these fundamental

elements of Catholic education are more important than ever in these uncertain times, and they require safe environments in order to ensure the health and wellbeing of all.



Catholic schools continue the teaching ministry of Jesus. They give witness to the Gospels and to the truth of our Catholic way of life. They help adults, youth and children in diverse regions of our archdiocese come to a deeper understanding of God's plan for human life and for all creation. Catholic schools are powerful instruments of evangelization—helping members of the Catholic community and others from many diverse faiths, cultures and economic backgrounds grow intellectually, personally and spiritually as members of the one family of God. Catholic schools are also vital to the social ministry of the Church—through the assistance they provide to students and families in need but also in their commitment to teaching social justice and to providing students with opportunities to serve others.

Catholic schools contribute directly to the health and vitality of the Church in central and southern Indiana. Along with parish religious education programs, youth ministry and other means of lifelong faith formation and education, our Catholic schools provide religious education classes, sacramental preparation, liturgical and prayer experiences, and opportunities for Christian witness and service. They help form the faith community, and they challenge us to look beyond our own needs to the urgent needs of individuals, families and society at large.

Considering the powerful effect that Catholic schools have on the lives of individuals, families and local communities, it is understandably painful—even tragic—when one of our schools closes. When a Catholic school closes it is almost always because of finances. This is especially true today when schools that were already struggling to make ends meet must deal with the economic effects of COVID-19.

Just last week, Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles and president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley, OFM, Cap. of Boston, Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan of New York, Cardinal Blase J. Cupich of Chicago, Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R. of Newark and Bishop Michael C. Barber, SJ of Oakland and chairman of the USCCB's Committee on Catholic Education cosigned a letter requesting that emergency aid to Catholic schools be included in the next federal COVID emergency relief package.

“The economic devastation that has hit so many of America’s families has made it impossible for many struggling families to continue paying tuition,” the bishops wrote. “As a result, already 140 Catholic schools have permanently closed their doors, and hundreds more are in danger of being unable to open in the fall. The closure of schools that serve urban areas are disproportionately harmful to low-income and black children served by these schools.”

They continued, “Not only is this devastating to each of those school communities, their staff and business partners, but it has a detrimental impact on local taxpayers. For every student educated in a Catholic or non-public school, taxpayers save thousands of dollars. Nationwide, Catholic schools save state and local governments more than \$20 billion annually.” The letter asked for the U.S. Congress to designate 10% of emergency K-12 education funding for scholarship aid to low-middle income private school families.

I urge all Catholics in the Archdiocese of Indianapolis to contact members of Congress to urge them to support emergency assistance for our nation’s Catholic Schools. This should not be a partisan political issue. It is, or should be, an issue of vital concern to all Americans.

We want all our Catholic schools here in central and southern Indiana to demonstrate a vibrant, hope-filled spirit that proclaims to the whole world that Christ is alive and active—in our homes, in our parishes and school communities and in our world. Every Catholic school in our archdiocese needs to be a vibrant community of faith that is carrying out the teaching ministry of Jesus in ways that are visible, transformative and service-oriented.

The challenges are enormous. In order to remain vibrant, a Catholic school must be able to demonstrate that it is Alive in Christ! Three priorities for our schools are: 1) strong Catholic identity, 2) evidence of growth and vitality and 3) financial health and the ability to help those who otherwise could not afford a Catholic school education.

The measures that we use to assess all three of these priorities can vary, but they will always involve a combination of factors ranging from deeply spiritual values to extremely practical considerations. The growth and vitality of a school community is directly related to its Catholic identity and its financial health. To keep our schools growing, we must keep them Catholic. And we must help them meet their financial obligations. These are enormous challenges today—and every day—but with God’s grace all things are possible.

We owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to the pastors, parents, teachers, staffs and generous benefactors who work together to keep our schools Alive in Christ. The witness that they give to the teaching of Jesus and to the mission of His Church is powerful – often life-changing! Let’s show them how much we value their efforts on behalf of our students, our Church and our communities by remembering them in prayer, by advocating for our Catholic schools at the local, state and federal levels, and by giving our time, talent and treasure to support this vitally important parish and archdiocesan ministry.

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Challenges and hopes await for students, teachers as another school year begins

By John Shaughnessy

Mary McCoy knows that the approaching academic year for Catholic schools in the archdiocese is already being marked by a combination of uncertainty and anxiety—just as fears concerning the coronavirus have had an impact on every school system in the United States.



At the same time, the assistant superintendent for the Office of Catholic Schools in the archdiocese knows how hard administrators, principals and teachers have worked and prepared this summer to make the 68 Catholic schools across central and southern Indiana as safe as possible.

“Our principals and our teachers want nothing more than for our students to be safe,” McCoy said. “Our Catholic schools have been known to be safe environments, and they will continue to be safe environments. They’re just going to look a little different.

“Our teachers and principals have worked all summer to ensure there’s a safe environment for our kids to come back to because they do miss them. They miss them so much. They know their kids so well, and they know their families so well. That’s the beauty of our Catholic schools.”

McCoy shared one more key element that has guided administrators, principals and teachers as Catholic schools in the archdiocese prepare to open throughout August for in-school instruction.

“A big concern we’ve heard from principals and teachers is that in Catholic schools we focus so much on relationships,” she said. “So the prayers have been to get the kids in the building and really focus on those relationships at the beginning of the year so if they do have to go virtual, they’ve at least got those relationships built with their students.”

Those insights about the hopes and challenges of this school year were part of an Aug. 3 conversation that The Criterion had with McCoy and her two fellow assistant superintendents, Rob Rash and Michelle Radomsky. The three assistant superintendents are sharing responsibilities in leading the Office of Catholic Schools following the recent resignation of Gina Fleming as superintendent.

Here are some other key insights they shared regarding the start of the school year.

Relying upon medical experts to prepare for the start of the school year

McCoy: “One of the main ‘best practices’ we’ve stressed over and over all summer is for administrators to work with your local health department. Because they are the medical experts. Focusing on everything from ensuring the safety of the students to ensuring that proper protocols are being followed if there is a positive case or if a student is showing symptoms.

They've all done re-entry plans. They have the blessings or approval from their local health departments as well."

Making parents part of the process of keeping their children and schools as safe as possible

McCoy: "We're asking all parents to do the monitoring of their own kids—to do temperature checks, to monitor whether their own kids are showing any sort of symptoms. And if they do, to keep them home. There's a monitoring sheet they're supposed to complete each morning."

Rash: "My advice to parents is to trust the administration. Trust that they're working diligently on making your school safe. Trust the advice from administrators and teachers to wear masks and do social distancing. I know from talking to them, they make good faith attempts."

Establishing a system for administrators to follow if a student or teacher tests positive for COVID-19

Radomsky: "They're to contact their local health department, and also they're to contact our office. We have a form online that they're to fill out, so we're kept aware of the cases in our schools. The local health department will give them the information they need—who needs to be notified, contact tracing. They're recommending dedicated seating charts for each class, for all lunch periods, to help if tracing is needed."

McCoy: "That's why they're encouraging us to keep our students in cohorts. Pretty much that second-grade class is with that second-grade class all day long—for lunch, for recess. So if there is a kid who gets it in second grade, the contact tracing will be a lot easier."

Trying to balance the safety of high school students with their need to interact with fellow students

Radomsky: "Many of our Indianapolis high schools are doing some sort of hybrid model, only having half the kids in the building at a time, at least at the start, to cut down some of those social possibilities of huge masses of people congregating in the hallways. A lot of them have looked at different options for lockers so students don't have to go to their lockers between classes so there isn't the sort of congregating there."

McCoy: "To add to that, we've asked all schools to put into their plans an education piece with their students and their staff—to make them aware of why we are doing this and

knowing the facts behind the virus so students do understand why it is important to have a mask on and why social distancing is important. We've encouraged all our schools to have that training with our students, our teachers, our staffs in the first couple of days."

Reassessing a student's education level after ending the past school year with virtual learning

McCoy: "There are obviously going to be gaps there, some bigger than others. As we know, some students had better access than others and better resources at home, and more help from parents."

Radomsky: "Teachers want their students in the building. More than anything else, they want to meet them, assess them and give them that kind of instruction they were taught to give those kids."

Looking out for the welfare and health of teachers

McCoy: "One of the big concerns principals have is the safety of our teachers and our staffs. They worry about them even more than the students because they're more vulnerable. We're encouraging them to have individual conversations with their teachers, and make sure the teachers are feeling comfortable to approach their administrators when they do have concerns or challenges with coming back into the building and instructing their students."

Setting different expectations if a switch to virtual learning has to be made

McCoy: "I think it will be much more structured this year. I was just

looking at someone's plan. They need to be online at a certain time. They need to be in uniform. They need to have no food, no drinks, no restroom breaks without the teacher's permission. They need to make sure their assignments are turned in at a certain time. I think we've learned to set high expectations for those who are learning at home."

Keeping the focus on Catholic education

McCoy: "We're here to form and educate our students in our Catholic faith. Yes, we can still do it virtually. However, there's nothing like doing it in person and being able to attend Mass and being able to participate in prayer together as a community."

Radomsky: "Even at the end of last year, our principals and teachers were still praying with their students online. We saw all sorts of things in May with May crownings, and other ways

that our schools were able to do things virtually. And certainly the way that religion can permeate into all the other subjects—that still happened in our schools.

“It’s a challenge for our teachers, but they’re up to the challenge.”

A Message from Pope Francis: Words of Challenge and Hope

In a particular way, Catholic educational institutions have the mission of offering horizons that are open to transcendence so that Catholic education can make a difference by cultivating spiritual values in young people. The culture of indifference, which envelops relations between individuals and peoples, as well as the care of the common home, also corrodes the sense of humanism.



A synergy of the various educational realities is needed to confront this challenge and particularly requires working with families where one learns to come out of one’s self and place oneself in front of the other, to listen, to share, to support, to respect, to help, to coexist. Catholic educational institutions are called to build a humanism that proposes a vision of society centered on the human person and his or her inalienable rights and capable of instilling a soul in the same economic progress so that it may be aimed at the promotion of every man and woman in their entirety.

This humanistic perspective today cannot fail to include ecological education, which promotes a covenant between humanity and the environment, at the different levels of ecological balance: the interior one with one’s self, the one in solidarity with others, the natural one with all living beings and the spiritual one with God.

My Prayer for You

Sacred Heart of Jesus, watch over our Catholic school communities. By your grace, make them strong in faith, education and service to their students, families and communities. Bless our teachers and staff members. Help them to create safe environments for learning and for nurturing the kinds of healthy relationships that are so important to our schools' success. Above all, bless our students and their families. May they grow in knowledge, love and service in Your Holy Name.

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