

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS CENTER OF EXCELLENCE



Catholic K-8 model supports whole child through crucial middle school years

For 25 years, Principal Kate Wollan has joined her colleagues and students at Nativity of Our Lord Catholic School in

St. Paul to cheer on the new class of kindergartners as they proudly enter the building on their first day of school. It's a special moment, especially knowing that many of the 5- and 6-year-olds will walk the halls through their early teenage years.

"It's so exciting to see them and envision that journey all the way through to when we're shaking their hand at [eighth-grade] graduation," she said.

The pre-kindergarten or kindergarten through eighth-grade (K-8) educational model commonly is used in Catholic schools. It gives students the opportunity to excel in leadership and academic achievement in the middle school years. Conversely, research has shown that leaving for a separate middle or junior high school can hurt adolescents' social, academic and leadership development during this crucial period.

"I think a K-8 environment or pre-K-8 environment allows these kids to be in a place where they can develop their leadership skills, build on their confidence to figure out who they are becoming and to do so in a safe environment with people who know and recognize the gifts and talents they have," Wollan said.

A growing pool of research supports the K-8 model. A 2016 study published in the *American Educational Research Journal* found that middle school-age students performed better in K-8 schools versus separate sixth- through eighth-grade middle schools or sixth through twelfth grade schools. Beyond academics, the study found that these students felt safer and had a greater sense of belonging in their leadership roles.

Wollan has seen both high-performing students and those who need additional assistance excel in the K-8 model. She recalled one student who struggled with learning and socialization due to being on the autism spectrum, but flourished by staying at Nativity to build on his progress versus starting over in a new school. He completely transformed himself as an upperclassman, Wollan said, designing the cover of the yearbook, taking the lead in the school play and improving academically.

In Shoreview, St. Odilia Catholic School Principal Brian Ragatz has also seen his upper-class students succeed as they navigate through physiological changes and search for independence. He said that the key is understanding their unique needs and steering them in the right direction.

“The benefit of a [K-8] Catholic school is that you have so many people on that side of the road pointing them, guiding them and encouraging them to take the right steps,” Ragatz said.

The sense of community and accountability that develops at St. Odilia represents an asset for upper-class students — something that’s difficult to develop in new and likely larger middle school environments, Ragatz said. He sees that sense of community when he sits in on eighth-grade religion class and hears students talk about their faith and comfortably share differing viewpoints.

“Those conversations don’t happen unless they have an authentic relationship and feel safe with one another,” he said. “If you’re in a safe environment, you not only get to know others, but you [also] get to know yourself more.”

Brady and Nikki Blaska of Vadnais Heights have two children at St. Odilia, while their oldest, a St. Odilia alum, attends Totino-Grace High School in Fridley. They’ve watched their children serve as altar servers and lectors at Mass, learn public speaking skills and understand the importance of being a leader in their schools and church.

“The middle school years are such a growth period for kids, physically, emotionally and spiritually, and we wanted them to be able to grow with God as the focus during those rapidly changing years and in a community that we’re a part of,” Nikki said about choosing a K-8 Catholic school.

Luke Blaska, a seventh-grader, plays on the soccer and basketball teams and serves on student council with his eighth-grade sister, Mary. He’s proud to be a role model for younger students.

“It helps them to give an example of how it is when you’re older and gives them a good role model to know how to act,” he said.

At Nativity, Wollan also gives upper-class students additional responsibility and leadership opportunities to help them develop their own personal accountability, values and virtues. It’s all a part of serving the unique needs of middle school-age students who are wavering between life as a child and a young adult. When given the opportunity in a supportive K-8 setting, she said that students will rise to the occasion and succeed.

“We’re fortunate that we have such a strong pre-K through eighth grade system in the archdiocese,” Wollan said.