

The state of Catholic schools:

Q and A with the superintendent



Sister Helen Jean Kormelink, O.S.B., diocesan superintendent of Catholic Schools for the diocese

Sister Helen Jean Kormelink, O.S.B., is the superintendent of Catholic schools for the diocese. She recently sat down with Carlos Briceno to talk about the current state of Catholic schools and her vision for the future.

What is your vision for the schools in the next 10 years?

At the end of 2019, I would like to see every Catholic school so Catholic that it shines out like a beacon of hope for its parish, for the church and for the civic community. By graduation, I would like

for every student to have developed a strong personal relationship with Jesus Christ that will sustain them throughout their whole life. I would like to see Catholic schools have such a strong academic component that every student would be able to succeed in any future endeavor.

I would hope that all students in Catholic school would meet their spiritual, intellectual, and physical potential. In the future, I see Catholic schools that are financially viable; they will be operating with balanced budgets and significant endowments. Schools will be contributing to the parish in service and ministry so they are not considered a drain on parish finances. I see Catholic schools that are available to every student whose parents want them to attend. I see a Catholic community willing to provide

Catholic school education for the poor and for the ethnic minorities.

How do you ensure that the schools are espousing the values that parents are looking for in sending their children to a Catholic school?

The Catholic Schools' Office is in constant communication with the schools about the values they espouse. At every meeting, we encourage, foster, and hopefully ensure these values are stressed. We also perform a diocesan evaluation every five to six years, and we look

at the value-based education they provide. We conduct parent surveys and have parent/school board meetings where we talk about those issues. We hold principals accountable to operate schools that are identifiably Catholic.

Why are Catholic schools dramatically different than public schools?

They are dramatically different in several ways. The amount of time that they give to formal religious education is significant. It's 35 to 45 minutes every day, five days a week and nine months a year.

This time element may be the most dramatic difference, but it is only one of the differences. Church documents say that when a child or parent enters a Catholic school, the environment should be so dramatically different that they feel as if they were entering a whole new world. This means the physical surroundings and the people involved all breathe a spirit that is radically different than public schools. The spirit which permeates Catholic Schools is the Holy Spirit. Each of the persons in a Catholic school considers their students as Christ. Teachers, in the family of God, consider themselves the older brothers and sisters of the students they teach. The atmosphere is one of love and kindness.

The physical environment is different, too. Christian symbols abound. You will find Bibles, religious bulletin boards, statues and a crucifix.

Holidays are celebrated differently; for example, Halloween is "All Hallows Eve." During Christmas, hymns are sung, St. Nicholas visits schools, cribs are displayed. Thanksgiving celebrations proclaim it is God from whom all blessings flow. Easter is not just bunnies, chicks and candy but resurrection.

Administrators and teachers are taught to be Christ for students and parents. The

policies and procedures are drafted with a sense of Christ model; discipline is based on "What would Jesus do" in this situation? Justice is very important; kindness and service are important.

Name three adjectives that describe a Catholic school, and why you picked them.

I think Catholic schools are alive. They are alive with spirit and enthusiasm, which really is the Spirit of God, the spirit of family, the spirit of church and the spirit of youth who are happy. I think Catholic schools are purposeful. If you talk to any student in a Catholic school, you will see they are determined to learn. They know why they are at school. They know how important learning is. They have fun at school but know they are there to learn, and they will. Schools are community. And that is because it really does take a whole church to raise a child. And the school is an arm of the church. It is one of the best vehicles for building community between staff, students, families, and their church. So, Catholic schools provide a community of learners who love God and worship their God.

Reflect on the following statement by the American Bishops: "We are

convinced that Catholic schools continue to be 'the most effective means available to the church for the education of children and young people, who are the future of the church.'" This is so true! I

think Catholic schools are effective in the academic area and faith formation. They're effective in developing the whole child – mind, body, and spirit. They're effective in reaching out to families. Particularly in the inner city, our Catholic schools function as agents of social justice/Catholic charity because they are providing service, good news for students of all ages, of all economic status and diversity.

Share a story that you want people to know about Catholic schools.

A third-grader at St. Joseph's in Downers Grove was taken out of school and sent to the local public school. He was there for about three weeks, and the mother came back to the principal and said, "Can I transfer my son back to St. Joseph's?" He said, "Mother, I have to go back to St. Joseph's. I like our school, but they don't know where to go to get the feeling of the day." In Catholic schools we provide, day-by-day, the feelings, the attitudes, and the values we want Catholic children to develop. ☩

In the diocese, this school year:

- There are **70** Catholic schools in **43** cities.
- Total enrollment is **23,529**.
- **15,719** students are in elementary, while **5,735** are in secondary schools.
- **2075** are in our independent preschools.

- **1,620** professional staffers work in Catholic schools, and **97 percent** are laymen and women.
- The average annual cost of educating one child in elementary school is **\$4,175**. In secondary school, the cost is **\$9,350**.
- The average tuition in elementary schools is **\$3,290**.
- The average secondary tuition is **\$7,657**.