



RamTell E-Newsletter

March 2024

Reflection

Catholic Schools: Instruments of Faith Formation, Evangelization and Social Justice

Catholic schools continue the teaching ministry of Jesus. They help adults, youth, and children in diverse regions of our country 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. Along with parish religious education programs, youth ministry and other means of lifelong faith formation and education, 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 students to

look beyond their 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 these schools closes. Research conducted by scholars at The Catholic University of America confirms that when a Catholic school closes it is almost always because of finances. But what the research also tells us is that school closings are not inevitable or unavoidable. Catholic schools can become stronger financially, but only if they are truly growing in their Catholic identity, welcoming new (and increasingly diverse) students, and increasing their capacity for financial management and fundraising especially through stewardship education and endowment development.

Programs like the University of Notre Dame's Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) which is profiled in this issue of the RamTell e-newsletter, provide invaluable assistance to Catholic Schools in their efforts to thrive and grow as powerful instruments of faith formation, evangelization, and social justice.

Profile

The University of Notre Dame's Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE)

Since 1993, the University of Notre Dame's Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) has sustained, strengthened, and transformed Catholic schools by:

- forming teachers and leaders,
- developing and disseminating innovative tools and research to integrate academic excellence and spiritual growth, and
- enhancing financial accessibility and operational vitality to ensure that all children, especially those in historically marginalized communities, have the opportunity to experience the gift of an excellent Catholic education.

According to Father Nate Wills, C.S.C., Ph.D., Director, Blended Learning Initiatives and a faculty member in the Mary Ann Remick Leadership Program, ACE helps Catholic school teachers, and their leaders, to overcome the serious challenges of secularism and relativism in our contemporary culture.

"For most of its history," Father Nate says, "Catholic education depended on religious sisters to provide spiritual formation and solid catechesis in our schools. We're working to make sure that today's lay teachers and principals, who are the future of Catholic education, see themselves as missionary disciples, committed to inviting others (students, families, and the broader school community) to friendship with Jesus Christ." But ACE goes beyond simply strengthening the faith of its participants. They equip

Catholic school teachers and leaders with the skills and points of view they need to succeed, based on the best of educational research.

Catholic schools have established themselves as unparalleled engines of both human formation and social transformation. They have a proven record of producing young men and women who are more likely to graduate from high school, engage in the political process, and give back to society through charitable activities. A child who attends a Catholic school is 40 percent more likely to graduate from high school and 2.5 times more likely to graduate from college.

Since the program's founding, ACE has strengthened K-12 schools through innovative practices in four realms integral to school transformation: forming talent, expanding access, enhancing school vitality, and conducting research on school improvement.

With a presence throughout the nation and world, ACE strives to ensure that all children, regardless of background, have the opportunity to receive an excellent Catholic education. In the Latino Enrollment Institute, special attention is being given today to the recruitment and retention of Latino students. ACE's Program for Inclusive Education (PIE) helps school leaders be more inclusive in their teaching priorities. Father Nate says that his program, Higher-Powered Learning, helps teachers and leaders use a "blended-learning approach to classroom pedagogy by helping teachers use adaptive computer programs to personalize their instruction."

Too often, all we hear reported in the news media is the sad news of schools struggling to meet enrollment goals and to be sustained financially. The good news, according to

Father Nate, is that during the past 30+ years, individuals and institutions which have participated in ACE programs have experienced great success. Here are just some of the statistics that are indicators of ACE's success:

- 75% of ACE teachers remain in education
- 57% of those who continue to teach remain in Catholic schools
- 91% of principals/school leaders continue to serve in education
- 82 % serve in Catholic schools

ACE graduates demonstrate creativity in school governance and sustainability. They are innovative in their pedagogy and curriculum enhancement, and they develop and implement service projects designed to help students integrate academic instruction with engagement in the community."

"We're working to help teachers and principals develop the skills and vocabulary they need to be instruments of evangelization in schools, parishes, and dioceses throughout the United States and beyond," Father Nate says. "We're grateful for all the support we receive from generous benefactors who recognize the importance of our work and who share their resources with us.



Father Nate Wills, C.S.C., Ph.D., Director