

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS:
REINVESTING IN OUR FUTURE

Church of St. Peter, Mendota
August 11, 2011

Remarks to School Principals & Presidents, and Pastors & Business Administrators with
Schools

BY THE MOST REVEREND JOHN C. NIENSTEDT

I welcome you here to the Church of St. Peter, a historic community of faith, where our forebearers were among the first in what eventually would become the State of Minnesota to gather, celebrate and pass on, through the celebration of sacraments and their educational efforts, our Catholic faith. Those first pioneers and those who came after them, men and women of diverse heritage yet united in faith, made a significant investment in the future and their witness has been our most fortunate inheritance. I am mindful as I begin my remarks of the debt we owe to those who have taught us the faith and helped us come to know Jesus, who is the way, the truth and the life. But far from a debt that oppresses I am grateful that you, like me, find in this debt, in our common inheritance, an encouragement to make our investment in the future and to be witnesses in our own day. Our collective investment and common witness is the inheritance we, too, will leave to future generations. Mindful of this truth, permit me to say at the outset how grateful I am for your witness and that of your co-workers. We are blessed in this Archdiocese with so many dedicated pastors, principals and teachers; know of my gratitude for the good and essential work you do in educating and forming the young people of this local Church. They are the future of our faith communities and I am excited by the reinvestment in their future which we begin here today.

This gathering marks an important milestone in the life of this local church. As the announcement of the Archdiocesan Strategic Plan last October initiated with our parishes, the initiatives announced today commit us to a culture of best practice and sustainability in our Catholic schools. All too often in the past, school leaders tried their best, albeit often in an isolated fashion, to address declining enrollment and increasing costs. All too often, such challenges multiplied and began to imperil the parishes which sponsored them. All too often, the problems faced by our parishes and schools were brought to the attention of the Archdiocese only after they had become acute. A renewed sustainability in all our schools will be served by implementing best practices

and consistent standards even as each school will remain sponsored by and a reflection of their respective parish faith community. Our effort, as I noted in announcing the strategic plan, is to build upon our strengths and avoid duplicating our efforts.

In order that we avoid repeating mistakes of the past, John McMahon and Karen Rauenhorst, whom I appointed as co-chairs of the Catholic Schools Commission, will in a moment share with you an outline of the initiatives I have approved from their commission's recommendations as well as a timeline for our reinvestment to strengthen Catholic schools across our Archdiocese. As you will recall, the Catholic Schools Commission was established to build upon the work done over the past two years by the Archdiocesan Strategic Planning Task Force and the research into national best practice provided by the Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) consultants from Notre Dame. The Commission made recommendations to me in four strategic areas affecting our elementary schools: governance, educational excellence, advancement (or marketing) and funding. Before I ask John and Karen to outline the initiatives and the timelines for their implementation, however, I want to briefly reflect with you on the strength of our schools and affirm, once again, my commitment to Catholic education in a shared vision for the future of this local Church.

Ever since the first Catholic school opened its doors in the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis 160 years ago, Catholic schools have served the mission of this local Church by giving children a solid formation in the faith that is fully integrated with an excellent, academic education. Catholic schools in this Archdiocese and throughout the country have a long and proud tradition of educating the poor and the immigrant and of providing all students a foundation for success in life. This is a tradition which continues to this day. At present, some 30,000 students from families of diverse heritage and income attend Catholic schools, from preschool through high school. According to a report of the Minnesota Catholic Conference, Catholic schools in the Archdiocese save Minnesota taxpayers roughly 300 million dollars since our students are not enrolled in the public school system. That said, the benefits of these schools to society go far beyond such financial considerations. Over the past 16 decades, hundreds of thousands of students in this Archdiocese have benefitted from our endeavor to form the whole person – spiritual, academic, and social – while society as a whole has benefited from the investments of time, talent and treasure that our graduates have made in their communities and places of work. By almost every standard, Catholic schools do an outstanding job of educating the whole child in their knowledge of the faith, in their understanding of the truth, and in their readiness to serve their neighbor by building up the common good.

Catholic schools are also, of course, fundamentally important to the future of our Church. A recent study by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University found that those educated at Catholic schools were more likely to be among the most engaged members at Catholic parishes across this country – not only are they more regularly gathered for worship every Sunday but they are also more likely to give generously of their time, talent and treasure thorough the year. In addition, at a time when an increase in vocations is crucial for the health of our Church, it is important to note that, historically, young men and women who attend Catholic school are more likely than there non-Catholic school peers to consider seriously entering the priesthood or religious life. Catholic schools have also provided the formation for tens of thousands of men and women who serve as lay ministers in parishes, schools and other institutions not mention almost every conceivable profession in the marketplace.

Why are Catholic Schools so successful and why must we reinvest in them in this local Church? During his apostolic visit to the U.S. in 2008, Pope Benedict XVI answered those questions when he reminded Catholic educators, “Education is integral to the mission of the Church to proclaim the Good News. First and foremost every Catholic educational institution is a place to encounter the living God who in Jesus Christ reveals his transforming love and truth (cf. *Spe Salvi*, 4).” In calling on the entire Catholic community to contribute to the support of Catholic schools, our Holy Father went on to say, “Their long-term sustainability must be assured. Indeed, everything possible must be done, in cooperation with the wider community, to ensure that they are accessible to people of all social and economic strata. No child should be denied his or her right to an education in faith, which in turn nurtures the soul of a nation.”

Our goal of sustained and increased access to our Catholic schools is not, for me, a theoretical aspiration. As you may know, I, myself, am a product of a parish elementary and Catholic high school in Detroit where I was blessed throughout my education to encounter the living God and the transforming power of his love and truth revealed in Jesus Christ. I believe the education and the formation I received early in life prepared me for the responsibilities which the Lord has subsequently asked me to assume. And so it should be and, I pray, continues to be for every student of Catholic education regardless of whether they serve in the Church or in the world. Convinced of the blessing that our Catholic schools are for us, it has been a great joy for me to visit all 13 of our high schools and 73 of our elementary schools since arriving three years ago.

As our Catholic schools are an indispensable tool for the mission of the Church and the soul of our nation I believe that this entire local Church should share responsibility for supporting our Catholic schools. Such support for Catholic schools

was one of the seven guiding principles that I established for the strategic planning process which was launched in February 2009. As you may recall under the Archdiocesan Strategic Plan announced in October 2010, all of our Catholic school communities were asked to review their sustainability and this work continues.

For its part, the Catholic Schools Commission, after wide consultation with stakeholders across the Archdiocese, recommended steps to foster a culture of ongoing evaluation and greater sustainability in Catholic schools throughout this Archdiocese. To assist in the realization of this culture the Commission recommended the establishment of an Archdiocesan Catholic Schools Advisory Council. I have accepted this recommendation and it will be the role of this Council and the Office of Catholic Schools to carry forward this critical work. In accomplishing this work in the coming months and years, the Archdiocesan Catholic Schools Advisory Council together with the Office of Catholic Schools will continue to draw on the expertise of educators who work every day in our schools and are closest to the critical issues in our classrooms as well as in our communities.

I have also accepted the Commission's recommendation that an independent foundation be formed to work with the Archdiocesan Catholic Schools Advisory Council and the Office of Catholic Schools to leverage new sources of support for Catholic schools. (I am pleased to announce a recent gift of \$600,000 that a young Catholic couple made which will serve as the beginning of this foundation.)

Our overall goal must include more than an excellent education in reading, writing, math and science. It must aim at more than the development of personal character through social relationships, successful sports teams, creative arts, and service projects. The overall goal for all Catholic schools is to prepare young men and young women to be virtuous disciples of Christ and, as such, to be active leaders in our Catholic Church as well as our civic communities; bringing their gifts of faith and reason to the issues and challenges of our world today. Guiding us to this goal is a vibrant and cohesive vision which we affirm anew today: The Catholic schools of the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis form students to live out the Gospel message, achieve academic excellence, and lead by faith, virtue, and reason.

However, there are significant challenges in realizing this vision. The dramatic demographic shifts of the past half century, along with the need for more specialization, constantly changing technology in the classroom, and greater accountability regarding educational quality have changed substantially the landscape for *all* schools: public, private, and parochial.

At present, our Catholic schools have, on the whole, 20% more seats than they have students. When many of the current Catholic schools were built, families were able to send their children to Catholic schools at relatively nominal cost thanks, in large part, to the religious sisters and brothers who administered and taught in those schools. Today, many dedicated lay men and women serve in schools and justice demands a wage worthy of their effort. This is a reality we must acknowledge when taking account of our overall costs.

Moreover, there are families who desire a Catholic school education but believe that Catholic schools are unaffordable or otherwise inaccessible. During the 2004-2005 school year, for example, roughly a quarter of all children baptized in the Catholic Church in this Archdiocese were attending Catholic school. In 2011, a local parent survey participated in by more than 2,500 parents or guardians of school age or soon to be school age children found that tuition costs were the most significant negative factor associated with our Catholic schools in their school decision-making process. Nationally, Catholic schools enroll a mere three percent of all Latino children, from a population that is predominantly Catholic and deeply committed to the faith. National and local surveys have shown that tuition costs as well as a perception that Catholic schools are too elite were the major barriers to Catholic school attendance among Latino families.

The increased mobility of our society and the concurrent loss of neighborhood parish-based Catholic culture also play a role in the declining enrollment at some Catholic schools. Perhaps the primary factor, however, is a loss of the sense of the value of a Catholic education and an erosion of the belief that support of such schools should be the responsibility of the entire Catholic community.

The schools within this Archdiocese are not unique in their need for strategic investments in order to be better positioned for the future. Many other dioceses across the United States, as well as public institutions locally and nationally, have gone through such reorganization in the past several decades. In 1965, the total school age population in the United States was 56.5 million, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Today, that number is 62 million. However, while there are more than 5 million additional children in the school age population group now than there were in the mid-1960s, a smaller percentage of children in this age group (just more than 3 percent versus nearly 10 percent in 1965) are enrolled in Catholic school. Locally, there are just more than 30,000 students currently enrolled in 95 Catholic schools (both elementary and secondary). In 1965, that figure was nearly 90,000 children enrolled in 180 Catholic schools within the Archdiocese.

In order to support school and parish leaders, teachers, staff, parents and other stakeholders in their efforts to keep our schools viable, and to realize fully this Catholic vision for schools, change - or more fittingly reinvestment - is needed. The challenges that lie before us are opportunities to strengthen our schools and allow us to move forward in confidence, knowing that our faith grounds us in Jesus Christ who calls us and his whole Church to a continuing conversion and towards the new life he offers.

The initiatives announced today are part of an overarching vision for this local Church, as articulated in the Strategic Plan, aimed at fostering a culture of ongoing evaluation and greater accountability so as to realize a more vibrant community of faith, hope and love. These are not the only initiatives necessary to attain that end. We still have need, for example, to reinvest in the religious education of students who are not fortunate enough to attend Catholic schools as well as to build faith relationships with all Catholic teenagers and college aged youth. But these initiatives with respect to Catholic schools are necessary and an important part of the investment we are called to make since Catholic schools are an essential part of the mission of this local Church to make the name of Jesus Christ known and loved by promoting and proclaiming the Gospel in word and deed through vibrant parish communities, quality Catholic education, and ready outreach to the poor and marginalized. Together, we can work to strengthen our schools for this next generation – as well as the following generations to come.

Again, I and this entire local Church thank you all for the good and essential work that you do. Please know of my prayerful support for you. At the same time, I ask for your prayers, as well, as we move forward in this reinvestment together. May God bless you!