

Catholic schools, the pandemic and a plan to move forward

Long before anyone had heard of the novel coronavirus or COVID-19, Catholic schools in the United States were facing existential challenges.

Declining enrollment, reduced revenues and increased operating expenses had squeezed thousands of Catholic elementary and secondary schools – especially those in low-income urban areas – out of existence in the last 20 years.

In some ways, the coronavirus pandemic has accelerated that painful national trend. Just as the virus is potentially deadly for people who have compromised immune systems or underlying medical conditions, COVID-19 has been devastating for already struggling Catholic schools.

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“The pandemic is a Darwinist phenomenon, both in regards to human health but also with the institutional vibrancy of Catholic schools. The strong get stronger. The weak are even more vulnerable,” said John Schoenig, the senior director of teacher formation and education policy for the University of Notre Dame’s Alliance for Catholic Education.

As Catholic schools struggle to survive through the pandemic’s fallout, Catholic education officials are beginning to see some ways in which COVID-19 may leave lasting changes, particularly in the day-to-day work of educating students.

“You’re going to see more customization in education, particularly in Catholic education, where I think we will see

more of an attempt to distinguish between educational models, even within diocesan schools,” Schoenig told Our Sunday Visitor.

With Catholic Schools Week being celebrated this year from Jan. 31 to Feb. 6, Catholic educators and experts took advantage of an opportunity to reflect on the mission that Catholic schools have to form their students in the light of the Gospel, and how that can be preserved and even improved long after the pandemic subsides.

“If we have zeal for that, if we are able to plunge ourselves more deeply into how the Church views education – that formative process of a very Christ-centered program – then I think we have seen from history that we’ll be able to survive this,” said Mary Pat Donoghue, the executive director of the Secretariat of Catholic Education for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.



Students work at their desks on the first day of the new school year at St. Matthew School in Franklin, Tenn., Aug. 6, 2020, with extensive COVID-19 protocols in place, including temperature screening and mandatory face masks for each student. (CNS photo/Rick Musacchio, Tennessee Register)

Some closed, some thrived

Anywhere from 150 to 200 Catholic schools have closed since the beginning of the 2019-2020 academic year. Enrollment is down 6% across the board, Donoghue said. When COVID-19 swept through the country last March, the nation's economy virtually shut down. Wage-earning families that were already struggling to make ends meet could no longer afford their children's tuition. Schools that were operating on razor-thin margins felt the brunt of those economic headwinds.

"You had schools that already had some inherent weaknesses, like low enrollment and needing a high percentage of parish subsidies to sustain operations. COVID really cuts deeply into those margins, and when that happens, a school finds itself unable to survive, as we've seen," Donoghue told Our Sunday Visitor.

Some Catholic school leaders tried to keep their schools open this academic year, but just weeks into the fall semester, as COVID-19 cases began skyrocketing again in the country and prompted another round of business shutdowns, they were forced to shutter their doors for good.



A locked fence is seen at a Catholic school. The Archdiocese

of Newark, N.J., announced Aug. 4, 2020, it was permanently closing eight schools due to the economic hit caused by the coronavirus pandemic. (CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)

“They couldn’t even meet their payroll,” Donoghue said. “If you already have a low enrollment and you lose 10% of that student body, it’s pretty devastating.”

Those closures disproportionately impacted low-income and working-class communities.

“It’s horrible for the parents. They love their schools. It’s horrible for the students. Hopefully, the families can find a new home for their students to attend school. That’s what we want for them, but it’s difficult,” said Kathy Mears, the interim president and CEO of the National Catholic Educational Association.

“We form true communities, true families, in these schools, and so it’s like a death for the families. It’s a horrible thing when it happens to your child’s school,” Mears told Our Sunday Visitor.

Meanwhile, in some middle-class suburban neighborhoods and exurban areas, Catholic schools that were on solid footing pre-pandemic in many cases actually saw their enrollments increase.

“I think some of the schools were better prepared to take on the challenges that the pandemic brought,” Mears said. “They were better able to pivot. They were better able to reach out and get assistance from places. They were just in a better position because they were stronger.”

Enrollment also increased at those Catholic schools because parents were looking for in-person classroom instruction for

their children. As a whole, Catholic schools were more successful in maintaining in-person classroom education than the larger public school systems, which are still more likely to have most, if not all, of their instruction entirely remote.

“One reason why you see that difference is that a Catholic school system remains a mission-oriented ministry, so the people leading and teaching in the schools are all in for the sake of the kids,” Schoenig said.

Where some public schools took weeks, even months, to transition their learning model from in-person to virtual via technological platforms like Zoom and Google Classroom, many Catholic school systems went entirely virtual over the course of a single weekend last March.

“It’s a smaller, nimbler system than the public school system, and a lot of that has to do with the way the schools are governed, where they actually have a good deal of independence and autonomy. It worked to the schools’ benefit,” Schoenig said.

In adapting to the immediate COVID-19-era educational landscape, the Catholic Social Teaching principle of subsidiarity – that decision-making should be made at the most local competent level – proved critical to the success of many Catholic schools.

“Having that authority at the local level meant it was simply easier for a principal or pastor to take the steps necessary for their individual school to quickly turn around,” Donoghue said. “There were certain inherent strengths of Catholic schools that rose to the top during the crisis.”

“We were uniquely positioned to do it because we believe in subsidiarity,” Mears said, emphasizing that Catholic school principals and teachers were able to make important decisions about how to safely operate their schools, integrate online

learning and later resume in-person instruction.

“The schools knew their kids,” Mears said. “They knew who had computers at home and who probably didn’t. They just literally went to work to make sure they could do everything they needed to do for their students. It truly was amazing, and I don’t know if the rest of the world will ever understand fully what they accomplished. I’m not sure they still fully understand what they accomplished. It was amazing, and it proved that the Spirit lives within us.”



A teacher at Our Lady of the Lakes Elementary School in Waterford, Mich., talks to masked students Aug. 25, 2020, during orientation as the school reopened during the COVID-19 pandemic. CNS photo/Valaurian Waller, Detroit Catholic

Long-term effects

Various published media reports over the past year indicate that some people who have had COVID-19 continue to suffer the effects of the viral upper respiratory disease for weeks, even months, if not longer.

In a similar way, the pandemic will have some long-lasting effects on Catholic schools, on everything from how they are organized and governed to the daily rhythms of classroom instruction, the integration of technology into education, parents' roles in their children's education and the "big picture" understanding among Catholic educators as to what it means to cultivate a missionary ethos in their schools.

"The pandemic brought home to parents that they really are their children's primary educators," Donoghue said. "We're hopeful that, on a macro level, this experience may promote the importance of parental choice in education and bring that to the fore, especially on the state level, as parents have, in many cases, felt abandoned."

With schools closed for weeks and learning having gone virtual last spring, the pandemic created a unique set of conditions where parents, on top of their usual responsibilities related to work, had to make sure that their children were still being educated, albeit in front of a computer screen.

But that experience, while frustrating at times for over-stressed families, also motivated more parents to be more directly engaged in their children's education by being in communication with teachers and aware of the material the students were being taught. Catholic education officials believe that trend will be felt long after Zoom classes fade into the background.

"I think what's going to wind up happening in education in the years ahead is that you're going to see more and more focus [among Catholic educators] on attending to parental agency," said Schoenig, who suggested that parents have been empowered more over the last 10 months than they ever had before in the history of American education.

"The fact is that parents are more aware of their unique responsibility and their distinctive role in the education of

their children,” Schoenig said.

Mears agreed, adding that parents as a whole “have never been so involved” in their children’s education.

“They know what goes on and what it takes to teach now, and I think that’s a good thing,” Mears said. “As a Church, we have always taught that parents are the first and primary teachers of their children. I think parents have been learning that for the last nine months, and that’s taught them a lot.

“I think we have to remember that we’re partners with the parents and to work with them,” Mears added. “And parents, when they want to keep their schools open, they’re going to work with you hand in hand to make that happen.”

The future of virtual learning

Some of the technology that has been used for virtual learning will not go away completely when the pandemic subsides and daily news reports no longer carry updates about new COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations and available ICU beds.

“Online learning will be here to stay for a very long time. It’s going to look different, but it’s going to be around in some shape or form,” said Mears, who suggested that the capability of virtual learning will be helpful in situations where, for example, a particular school experiences an outbreak of the flu.



Students carry crates with books and other school supplies as they leave Trinity Catholic Academy in LaSalle, Ill., Nov. 13, 2020. With cases of COVID-19 on the rise throughout the state, the Diocese of Peoria's 42 elementary and secondary schools went to remote learning for several weeks. The Catholic Post/Tom Dermody

"I think, very fortunately for students and families, that the Catholic schools will say, 'You know what, go ahead and stay home. Get well and don't infect others,'" Mears said. "Perfect attendance isn't going to mean the same thing anymore. That is going to be a change in how we function."

Students may worry that Zoom or Google Classroom may kill off the occasional winter "snow day," but no need to fear; Mears doesn't see that happening.

“But I think when people say that online learning has changed things, and that we’re not going back, I think there’s some truth to that,” Mears said. “I think school will look different in how we respond to things. I think you will see principals say, ‘We’re gonna go online for a couple of days because we have a lot of students ill with the flu.’”

In about 18 months, Schoenig expects Catholic school students will experience considerably less online learning than what they did about six months ago.

“But, to speak to the point of customization, there are some school communities that will say, ‘You know what? We want more of that,’” Schoenig said. “You will see more schools doing more (online learning) than we saw two years ago, but I don’t think it will be ubiquitous. If anything, I could see a move in the other direction, which would be toward a more classical liberal education, but I think we were on that road pre-pandemic anyway.”

Reevaluating the approach to Catholic schools

In the months ahead, as more of the population is inoculated against COVID-19 and society begins to slowly return to a semblance of normalcy, Schoenig said decisions about how Catholic schools adapt will be made at the school and diocesan levels.

“Because of that same principle of subsidiarity that allowed Catholic schools to respond so well to the pandemic back in March, a lot of it will come down to how principals, pastors, school superintendents and bishops navigate the unique contexts that they’re all dealing with,” Schoenig said.

Decades ago, most parish schools in any given diocese were organized and operated in similar fashion. That has gradually changed in the years since with bishops, especially in the

Northeast and Midwest, and Catholic education officials tinkering with new models of organization and governance to keep their schools sustainable. The pandemic may spur a new movement in reevaluating how the nation's Catholic schools are set up.

"I think in general what's going to start to happen is we're going to see more of an attempt to really customize educational models across dioceses based on what the parents are looking for," Schoenig said. "That will not happen at the expense of Catholic culture, mission or identity. We're just not going to have a one-size-fits-all model."

If anything, however, the pandemic will leave parents with fewer Catholic schools to choose from.

"I think that creates a situation where we will need to work harder and reflect more deeply on who we are and what it is we bring to the culture," said Donoghue, of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. "In that sense, it's an opportunity for us to ask ourselves: How are we distinctive? If we claim these distinct ends of Catholic schools, then how does that look different in practice from our neighboring [public] schools?"

In some cases, Schoenig said, the focus will have to be on the quality and number of children who are receiving a Catholic education, not so much on the number of school buildings that are open.

"If we provide a high quality Catholic education to as many kids as possible, in the long term we can get back to a place where there are more buildings serving more kids," Schoenig said. "But it may be that given the economics of all of this, the better move in the short term is to have fewer buildings in some places serving more kids."

Mears, of the National Catholic Educational Association, said that in many ways, the post-COVID world has to be "the beginning of a new era" for Catholic schools in the United

States.

“I believe what we need to do is remember why we exist: to teach children about Jesus. We need to keep that in mind with everything we do, and we need to understand that we need to work with parents and meet their needs,” Mears said.

“I also think we have to form partnerships with Catholic higher education and with higher education in general,” Mears added. “We have to look for people who want to support our work and help us with it.”

The Church, as a whole, Mears also said, has to think about how much it is willing to invest in Catholic schools to not only keep them open, but vibrant.

“I think (the bishops) will do that, but again, everybody is so busy,” Mears said. “And really the pandemic has demanded of us that we consider things that we should probably think about more regularly.”

Noting that various surveys indicate that a growing number of Catholics “disaffiliate” from the Church by the time they are 13, Donoghue said there is “a lot our Catholic schools can be doing to reach, not just those kids, but their families.”

“I think that’s another opportunity for us moving forward,” Donoghue added. “Those of us who work in Catholic education really need to have a zeal for souls, and we have to realize that our schools are important elements in evangelization and in catechesis, and in bringing souls, through those things, to Christ. That’s what animates us. It’s that call for witnesses, to bring into Catholic education, teachers who feel on fire for their faith. I think that’s going to be the call of the next age.”

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Like other Catholic school systems in the country, the Cristo Rey Network had to quickly adapt to a remote online learning model when the novel coronavirus pandemic shut down the country last March.



Franciscan Father Greg Gebbia, principal of Christ the King Preparatory School in Newark, N.J., talks with students during lunch Feb. 3, 2017. Christ the King is part of the Cristo Rey Network, an innovative nationwide 37-school educational approach to reach the urban poor with a Catholic high school education. (CNS photo/Octavio Duran)

“Especially since we exclusively serve students from low-income families, we had to make sure that all of our students had access to technology and (online) connectivity,” said Elizabeth Goettl, the CEO and president of the Cristo Rey Network.

“I think we did a very good job of providing some reasonably high quality remote learning opportunities last spring,” said Goettl, who told Our Sunday Visitor about the challenges the pandemic has posed to the Cristo Rey Network’s 37 college-preparatory Catholic high schools across the country.

The pandemic delayed the planned opening of a Cristo Rey school in Miami and has pushed back the planning for new schools in California and South Carolina.

“We’re pushing them back a year. We’re being cautious about that,” Goettl said.

The pandemic has also made it more difficult for Cristo Rey Network to complete the logistics of planning and setting up other new schools, impacting everything from visiting sites to meeting with real estate professionals.

In addition, COVID-19 disrupted the Cristo Rey Network’s corporate work study program, which places students in full-time, entry-level professional jobs. Five days a month, Cristo Rey students work in jobs that give them real-world experience and cover the majority of their educational expenses.

“As businesses closed down last spring, our students were not going to work,” said Goettl, who added that more than half of the Cristo Rey Network’s revenue comes from the corporate work study program. Families pay a small amount of tuition.

With the pandemic shutting down several workplaces, Goettl said the Cristo Rey Network reviewed its student worker development program and sought ways to give students valuable job skills, such as being trained in office software programs like Microsoft Excel.

“There will be some lasting changes in the corporate work study program,” Goettl said. “We’re also thinking about how we prepare students over time and considering alternate placements for our students, such as being certified translators and things they could do from home, such as remote work.”

Goettl said that the Cristo Rey Network’s corporate partners remain committed to the work study program and that several companies have assured her that they will not abandon in-person office work when the pandemic subsides.

“It’s absolutely critical that we get back the partners we lost and that we get new partners,” Goettl said. “Stumbling through this year, financially, on the good will of local donors has been miraculously successful. It shouldn’t have worked. About 15 of our schools, on paper, should have shut their doors.”

Some aspects of the corporate work study program may be remote for some students. Virtual learning technology that proved helpful during the pandemic may still be used in some capacity moving forward, though it will not replace in-person classroom instruction.

“I think most of the schools in the country last spring learned that the syncretic approach – recording a lesson and having kids watch the lesson on their own – doesn’t work very well,” Goettl said. “If it did, we wouldn’t actually need teachers.”

“We have had to be very intentional about whole-child development and structure that in a much different way. It can’t be as casual as it was,” Goettl said, adding that the virtual remote learning experience demonstrated to many the importance of in-person education.

This year, the Cristo Rey Network is planning for an extended summer program to help prepare incoming ninth grade students, many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds, for grade-level, college preparatory work. While some schools in the network are currently meeting remotely, they are still able to bring in students to their campuses who need academic support and resources, such as reliable Internet access, that they may not have at home.

“A challenge has been making sure that the kids and their families are safe, and that they feel safe when it’s time for the students to return to the classroom and the workplace,” Goettl said, adding that Catholic schools have long been known for creating safe and attractive educational environments.

“When you walk in through the doors of a Catholic school, there’s a culture, there’s a feel, there’s a climate,” Goettl said. “We need to think about how that came about, and how do we best recreate that in the remote setting, and how do we retain that in the physical setting? What are the elements of that culture that make a Catholic school unique, that we can make sure we can refine and develop so that it persists? That’s a really important part of the Catholic school experience for the student.”