

CONSOLIDATED OWENSBORO CATHOLIC SCHOOLS: HISTORY AND RATIONALE OF SUPPORT

History:

When Pope Pius XI created the Diocese of Owensboro, December 9, 1937, there was already a long-established history of Catholic school education in Daviess County and its environs. The Most Reverend Francis R. Cotton, first Bishop of the Diocese, in support of that tradition made it clear that each parish was to have a Catholic School. St. Frances Academy, the first Catholic school in Owensboro had been founded in 1849 and staffed by the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth. It included both elementary and high school grades. In 1889 St. Frances Academy moved to 5th and Allen Streets. In 1870 Saint Hubertus School opened, staffed by the Ursuline Sisters, first of Louisville and in 1919 of Mount St. Joseph. It was later to be renamed St. Joseph School. In 1915 it moved to 5th and Clay Streets. Mount Saint Joseph Academy opened in 1874. It was in operation until 1983. In 1950 Mount Saint Joseph Junior College moved into Owensboro and opened as Brescia College, which became a university in 1998. In 1950 the diocese opened Assumption High School, known familiarly as Owensboro Catholic High School. Franciscan Sisters (orders unspecified), Dominican Sisters of St. Catharine, KY, Sisters of Charity Of Nazareth, KY, Benedictine Sisters of Ferdinand, IN, and Louisville as well as Mount St. Joseph Ursulines, as well as religious women and men of other orders, all have served in the Catholic schools of the county. A summary list and history of Catholic schools in Daviess and McLean Counties (with St. Augustine Parish, Reed, in Henderson County) follows the body of this text.

As the summary list shows, each of the local parishes at one time or another had its own parochial school. For various reasons, the majority of these closed over time. But from the beginning there have also been mergers and consolidations for the purpose of continuing Catholic school education. Some Catholic schools opened with lay staffs, but most were opened with staffs of religious women. With decreasing numbers of religious women for faculty and rising costs of lay staffs and faculty, and in order to preserve Catholic School education in the city of Owensboro and its environs (excluding the eastern Daviess County parishes of St. William, St. Lawrence, and St. Mary of the Woods) the Owensboro and western Daviess County Catholic school parishes studied a broad consolidation plan from 1982 through 1988. In August 1988 articles of incorporation were filed creating Owensboro Catholic Schools, Inc., with the new locations effective in the fall of 1989. They consolidated to four city and one county Catholic elementary schools, one city middle school, and OCHS. Mary Carrico, St. Mary Elementary and Trinity High School continued as before in eastern Daviess County. In 1994 there was a further consolidation resulting in four Catholic school sites: K-3 (at Lourdes parish site), 4-6 (at Blessed Mother parish site), Middle- 7-8 (at Immaculate parish site), and OCHS. OCHS joined the OCS corporation in 1992. The eastern county Catholic schools continue as before. Currently, Brescia University and representatives of the Catholic elementary and secondary schools in Western Kentucky are making a sustained, collaborative effort to strengthen the connection between K-12 and post-secondary Catholic school education in the Diocese..

In the 1970s as costs to parishes and families increased and as the number of children in the parish member families decreased, enrollment in the Catholic schools also decreased. At the same time the parish school facilities were aging and becoming less serviceable to the programs they housed, funding was less and less available to repair, expand and replace these

facilities. Parish attempts to maintain stand alone Catholic elementary schools were often proving unsustainable. In some cases the parish costs for the school were over 95% of total parish income. Because of the historically substantial and sacrificial contributions by the religious sisters, the full costs of this education had been largely unknown to parishioners. As a result, some Catholic School parents readily accepted the necessity of increased financial support while others were slow to recognize this reality. At the same time, costs of staffing other ministries were increasing significantly, and aging infrastructures were in need of repair or replacement, making it even more difficult for parishes to make ends meet. Clearly, a convergence of many factors led to the current consolidation.

Except for St. Frances Academy (in its various forms) the local Catholic elementary school was often in the past physically and socially nested within a particular parish community. It was in many ways a focal center of parish family life. Its facilities usually served a dual purpose— during the school day and term it was the locus of the educational program, sacramental preparation for initiation, youth athletics, and childhood based organizations. Outside of school times it was the locus of adult meetings, parish organizations, parish and family celebrations, the religious education for children not enrolled in the Catholic elementary or high school, and the site for celebrations marking baptisms, weddings, anniversaries, and funerals. While something of this type of experience still may be found at the two elementary and the middle school sites, since they are located on particular parish campuses, the identities and experiences of most parishes are not shaped and flavored by a parochial school.

The movement to shift the costs more to the participating families with the parishes in a substantial supporting role significantly changes the prior experience and expectation of parishes bearing the primary responsibility for the faith education of the children of Catholic parishioners. At the same time a move has been made to shift the nature of the parish support from that of a grant based on parish membership to that of a grant in aid based on demonstrated financial need. These shifts are based on Catholic faith principles of the primary role of parental and family responsibilities for this education; on that of the faith community in a role of collective assistance to parents and families; and on that of parish stewardship. The same principles govern the free-standing parish-based faith formation programs outside the Catholic school structures.

Principles Governing Support of Catholic Schools:

The Catholic Parishes of Daviess County which participate in the consolidated Owensboro Catholic Schools, in order to preserve the availability of an excellent Catholic School elementary and secondary education for the children of their member families covenanted together to oversee, promote, maintain, and support this effort. This is a continuation of the established history of Catholic school education and of the episcopal mandate of the Most Reverend Francis R. Cotton, first bishop of Owensboro, a mandate modified but supported by each of his successors.

In 2005, echoing earlier statements, the Roman Catholic Bishops of the United States affirmed: “Catholic schools afford the fullest and best opportunity to realize the fourfold purpose of Christian education, namely to provide an atmosphere in which the Gospel message is proclaimed, community in Christ is experienced, service to our sisters and brothers is the norm, and thanksgiving and worship of God is cultivated [Renewing Our Commitment to

Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium, USCCB, 2005].” In this same text the bishops “unequivocally” committed themselves and “the whole Catholic community” to the following four goals:

- Catholic schools will continue to provide a Gospel-based education of the highest quality.
- Catholic schools will be available, accessible, and affordable.
- The bishops will launch initiatives in both private and public sectors to secure financial assistance for parents, the primary educators of their children, so that they can better exercise their right to choose the best schools for their children.
- Catholic schools will be staffed by highly qualified administrators and teachers who would receive just wages and benefits, as we expressed in our pastoral letter Economic Justice for All.

The bishops, furthermore, say that they “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 [To Teach as Jesus Did, no. 118].”

The OCS participating Parishes act to assist their parishioner parents and guardians in meeting their responsibility of providing an excellent education and faith formation for their children by way of Catholic School education. This is structured to augment and build upon the Catholic faith foundation provided by the parents, family, and parish.

By their acting together in this consolidated structure, parishes have pooled their financial resources to help meet the costs of Catholic School education. At times parishes have paid much less than the average subsidy per child, and at other times parishes have paid much more than the average subsidy. This flexibility has allowed parishes with differing economies of scale to maintain their participation in the system without exhausting the resources needed for other necessary ministry expenses. Meeting these costs are also some of the most challenging demands made on parish faith communities. The Catholic bishops, in their 2005 document, speaking of public advocacy for a possible new funding source urge: “The entire Catholic community should be encouraged to advocate for parental school choice and personal and corporate tax credits, which will help parents to fulfill their responsibility in educating their children.” The Catholic Bishops of Kentucky through the Catholic Conference of Kentucky also urge the Catholic faithful of our state to advocate passage of business tax credits for education in the Kentucky General Assembly.

It is the goal of all the participating parishes to help parents provide a Catholic School education for their children. It is also true that the parents themselves have the primary responsibility to make the sacrifices necessary to meet this goal. Increasingly, the parish resources made available to help parents pay for this education must be based on the established needs of the parents beyond their ability to pay. Parishes, for their part, as a principle of Catholic stewardship, dedicate a very large portion of their resources to the mission of the tradition (receiving and handing on) of the Catholic faith both to the adult membership (largely parents), to the rising generation of the Church, and by way of evangelization to the surrounding non-Catholic community.

– Fr. Richard Meredith, 2008, with contributions by Mr. Jim Mattingly, Owensboro Diocesan Superintendent of Schools, Mr. Ken Rasp, Director of Owensboro Catholic School System, and Sr. Emma Cecilia Busam, OSU, Owensboro Diocesan Archivist