

focus

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MICHIGAN
CATHOLIC
CONFERENCE

CATHOLIC EDUCATION

A PUBLIC BENEFIT TO THE STATE OF MICHIGAN

To put aside misperceptions of Catholic schools and the environment in which many students are educated, consider St. John Vianney Catholic School in Flint.

Most students and their families are at the poverty level, said Dr. Theresa Marshall, principal of St. John Vianney. For a family of four, that means living on \$32,000 a year.

A majority of families do not have the financial means to leave the city. Numerous students have endured trauma because of family separation and the deaths of parents and caregivers.

"Some of the kids' hearts are broken, because they've had family crisis," Dr. Marshall said, who added that the unstable situations present academic challenges.

Yet St. John Vianney is getting it done.

"We've had a lot of success with students," Dr. Marshall said. "We've been able to ... close the gap for a lot of kids," adding that some students have advanced by the equivalent of two years in one academic year.

"That's the Church's ministry that God has called us to do," she said.

St. John Vianney is one example of how Catholic schools serve an indispensable public service to the state of Michigan, whether in urban areas or rural settings, high-income or low-income communities, and everywhere in between.

By any measure, Catholic schools are delivering results, educating children at high academic levels and preparing

them for postsecondary education and the workforce. Catholic schools are forming the model citizens and leaders that Michigan needs.

"The people who we send out into the world are serving their communities, stepping up in leadership roles, and doing amazing things out there," said Melissa Pillifant, principal of Father Marquette Catholic Academy in Marquette. "Catholic education prompted them to do that."

Catholic schools are succeeding at their mission even without billions of dollars in public education funding that is unavailable to nonpublic schools due to Michigan's constitutional restrictions.

Despite the restrictions, the opportunity to experience Catholic education is widely available, primarily due to the Church's efforts to make it financially feasible to those who want it. Rich or poor, Catholic or non-Catholic, and children of all learning abilities are welcomed into Catholic schools across Michigan.

This edition of **focus** looks at how Catholic schools serve a diverse population of students and families, transforming lives by forming children into virtuous members of society.

"We do so much more than just take a portion of the kids and educate them, because those kids that come out build up our state and our local communities," Pillifant said. "We have such a far-reaching impact." ■

Catholic Schools Set the Academic Bar High

Catholic schools have long had a reputation for academic excellence. The bar is set as high as families and students want to go.

Brynn Anderson, a senior this past year at Lansing Catholic High School, said she's had the opportunity to pursue her "passion for learning languages" by taking courses in Latin, French, Japanese, and ancient Greek. Anderson credited it to "the choices my family made in finding an environment that nurtured my academic curiosity."

Many Catholic schools intentionally keep class sizes small to provide the individualized learning experience that most parents want for their children.

"We don't want to let anyone slip through the cracks, whether that's someone that's already advanced at their level, and we do different things to keep pushing them, or someone who is behind, and we have support to push them," said Brenda Mescher, principal of St. Charles Borromeo Catholic School in Coldwater.

One family benefiting from the individualized approach at St. Charles Borromeo is Denise Parsell and her eight-year-old son Ben, who is entering third grade. Parsell encouraged Ben's teacher to challenge her son academically this past year, and that is what she did.

"[Ben's teacher] has a totally different set of spelling words for different levels of kids. She makes sure the reading is at different levels for the students," said Parsell, who is a high school teacher at a nearby public school and has experienced the fruits of Catholic education in her career.

"I think the [St. Charles] kids are much more advanced ... when they come into the high school, [they] are often far

ahead of the public education students," Parsell said, who attributed it to "a really strong work ethic."

The work ethic extends beyond the classroom, as most Catholic schools incorporate extensive community service into their student formation. Students of Nouvel Catholic Central in Saginaw collectively contribute 10,000 service hours annually to the local community, said Dan Decuf, head of school for Nouvel Catholic Central.

In Warren, while De La Salle Collegiate High School often gets attention for its athletics, it was also featured when the entire student body participated in the school's annual day of service.

Catholic Schools Are Accessible and Affordable

Like any local school, Catholic schools are reflective of their communities. For All Saints Catholic School in Alpena, access to healthy food is a concern in the northeast Michigan community.

"We're not a wealthy community here," said Melissa Doubek, principal of All Saints. "We've got some kids here that their families are not able to pay for their lunches, and when the kids come to school in the morning, they've got a moldy sandwich, or an apple and a bunch of candy in their lunch ... we have to provide a lunch for this kid, we can't let this happen."

School leaders made it clear that not all families who attend their schools can actually afford to do so.

The misperception attributed to Catholic schools is that "these people have money, and that's why they joined the private schools ... that definitely wasn't the case with us," said Dr. Marshall, principal of St. John Vianney in Flint. Her school enjoys a partnership with Christ the King Catholic Church in Ann Arbor, which has raised money on behalf of the Flint school.

To eliminate the gaps, Catholic schools engage in extensive efforts to make Catholic education financially accessible for everyone. Without the fundraising by schools and their alumni, parishes, and dioceses, Michigan parents would bear the cost of Catholic education entirely on their own.

At a different St. John Vianney Catholic School in the west Michigan town of Wyoming, Principal Jenna Mastelone estimated school families paid about 52% of the cost to educate their children last year, with the school planning to distribute \$80,000 in financial aid this year.

In addition to local parish and alumni support, diocesan-wide scholarships and financial aid demonstrate how



Student at St. Charles Borromeo Catholic School in Coldwater. Photo provided by school.

Catholic schools are strongly supported by the Church at all levels.

The Diocese of Lansing in 2024, for example, launched a diocesan-wide Stewardship for Saints and Scholars capital campaign for Catholic education, with tuition assistance among the pillars of the campaign. The Archdiocese of Detroit and the Diocese of Grand Rapids have also conducted similar high-profile fundraising campaigns for Catholic schools in the past decade.

Most, if not all, Catholic school leaders will say the same thing: If a family wants a Catholic education, the school tries to make it work.

"No one has been turned away solely based on not getting financial aid," said Sherri Kirschner, elementary school principal at Our Lady of the Lake Catholic School in St. Joseph.

Catholic Schools Work to Meet Individual Family Needs

The welcome that Catholic schools extend to families include those who have children with special learning needs. Catholic schools, unlike their public counterparts, do not receive additional state funding for enrolling children with special needs.

While local school circumstances play a role, Catholic schools across Michigan are increasingly accommodating students of all learning abilities, and some are already doing so with great success.

"We end up sometimes having those students who come to us with an [individual education plan] in the public school, and then they do amazingly well in our school," said Mescher, principal of St. Charles Borromeo in Coldwater.

St. Mary Catholic Central (SMCC) in Monroe lays claim to having the first "full inclusion program of any Catholic high school in Michigan," in that enrollees attend class with their

St. Mary Catholic Central (SMCC) sophomores (from left) Avery Towne, Paxton Ball, and Gavin O'Kelley work together on a science experiment. O'Kelley is a member of the St. Andre Bessette Open Doors Inclusion program for SMCC students with special learning needs. *Photo by Tom Hawley, Monroe News.*

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See page 4 →

peers rather than learn in a separate environment, said Kyle McElvany, director of inclusion for SMCC.

McElvany oversees the SMCC Open Doors Inclusion Program, which was named for St. Andre Bessette, who, like Michigan's Blessed Solanus Casey, achieved holiness by serving as a doorkeeper who welcomed others. The program accommodates children who have Down syndrome, autism, cognitive impairments, and traumatic brain injuries. The program has grown from two students in the first class to six students enrolled in the most recent school year, McElvany said.

It began in 2018 when a longtime SMCC family wanted their child with Down syndrome to experience Catholic education like his older siblings. The first class included that child, Jacob Goda, who became one of the five graduates of the program to date. Goda has since completed his collegiate studies and has returned to work with the St. Andre program.

Mark and Lyn Lyall, parents of Luke, a current Open Doors program participant entering his senior year, said their son has grown academically and socially at SMCC. Luke's parents said he is intelligent but has learning disabilities that include one akin to dyslexia but with numbers, Lyn Lyall said.

"We've seen him flourish, frankly, from an educational perspective," Mark Lyall said, noting his son carries a 3.7 grade point average and is also involved in the football program. "I couldn't be more proud."

Perhaps just as important as student success is the ripple effect that the St. Andre program has created among other Catholic schools. Schools across the country have started programs based on the SMCC model, McElvany said.

In Michigan, Divine Child High School in Dearborn, Regina High School in Warren, and St. William Catholic School in Walled Lake are among those that have started or recently expanded their capabilities to serve students with special learning needs. *Continued on page 6 →*



FREE YEAR OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION HELPED FAMILIES LEAVE FAILING SCHOOL

**What would
happen if
more Michigan
students had that
opportunity?**



Student at San Juan Diego Academy in Wyoming.
Photo provided by Diocese of Grand Rapids.

ACatholic school in southwest Michigan recently began offering all new incoming students a fully paid, one-year scholarship.

Call it “a try-us-before-you-buy-us, kind of thing,” said Sherri Kirschner, elementary school principal at Our Lady of the Lake Catholic School in St. Joseph.

The opportunity for a free year of Catholic education resulted in “a big influx” of new students from a nearby struggling school district, she said. Most were not Catholic, and all were “at least a year behind” in reading and math.

It is not surprising that parents would flock to the best education they can find for their children, provided they have the opportunity. In Michigan, that opportunity is hindered by a constitution considered the most restrictive in the country when it comes to providing support for children in nonpublic schools.

“If we want to educate our children to the best of their ability ... we would offer options that best fit the needs of each child, and we don’t do that right now based on finances of the family,” Kirschner said. “If you have an underprivileged child in our state ... there aren’t a lot of options open for them.”

In 1970, Michigan’s constitution was amended to ban public aid for all nonpublic schools, a measure referred to as a “Blaine amendment,” the name given to similar restrictions in 37 other states.¹

The original Blaine amendment was a failed attempt by Congressman James G. Blaine in 1875 to amend the U.S. Constitution to prohibit funding for religious schools across the nation. The Blaine amendment originated from anti-Catholic bigotry,² as Blaine sought to counter Catholic schools, which he saw as a threat to the heavily Protestant-influenced public schools of that era.³

Michigan’s Blaine amendment not only bans aid to religious schools, but *all* nonpublic schools, giving Michigan the strictest-in-the-nation constitutional ban on public assistance for nonpublic schools.⁴

Blaine amendments have misled many Americans—and perhaps even Catholics—to believe public benefits can never be made available to religious institutions,⁵ as people often mistakenly cite the phrase “separation of Church and state,” which is not present in the U.S. Constitution or other governing documents.⁶

Blaine amendments have resulted in religious schools being excluded from receiving public support simply because they hold religious beliefs. It sets up a double standard for government aid, because the state provides funding to Catholic Charities and other religious agencies to help care for foster children or carry out charitable services to feed the poor.

But recent decisions from the U.S. Supreme Court have started to expose this religious discrimination as a violation of the First Amendment protection of religious exercise.

In a case decided in favor of a Missouri Lutheran school—which went to court after being denied a state grant to make its playground safer for children—the Supreme Court stated that “denying a generally available benefit solely on account of religious identity imposes a penalty on the free exercise of religion that can be justified only by a state interest of the highest order.”⁷

The situation in Michigan is jarring for Kirschner, who came to St. Joseph from nearby Indiana, where a state program helping families afford the school of their choice is expanding eligibility to all families regardless of financial means, she said.

Following the first official year of her school offering new students the fully paid scholarships, Kirschner estimated at least half the new students will choose to remain. Some will have to apply for the school’s other financial aid programs made possible by donors to continue attending.

Michigan Catholic Conference supports increasing state aid to nonpublic schools where constitutionally permissible—and eventual repeal of the prohibitive constitutional language—so that families can better access the education that best suits them. ■

2025-2026 MCC Public Policy Priorities for Catholic Schools

Expanding Access to Healthy Meals to All School Children

"All students should have access to a healthy meal ... ensuring students do not go hungry is crucial to student learning."

Paul Stankewitz, policy advocate for Michigan Catholic Conference, commenting on the state budget including nonpublic schools in the expanded school meal program

The state funds free breakfast and lunch for all students, regardless of family income, who otherwise would not qualify for federally funded meals. The most recent state budget included—for the first time—funding to provide expanded coverage for students at nonpublic schools that already participate in the federal breakfast and lunch program. Lawmakers should continue the funding to ensure the program meets the goal of providing all students with access to healthy meals at school.

Ensuring All Students Are Safe and Secure

"It would be devastating for our schools if they lost that [safety] funding or no longer have social workers and counselors in place to help our teachers support our students ... without it, we wouldn't be able to afford the security, we wouldn't be able to afford the counselors and social workers."

Eric Haley, Superintendent of Schools
Archdiocese of Detroit

Nonpublic schools have been included in school safety funding since 2015. Recent budget cycles have also included funding to address student mental health needs. Additionally, the most recent budget provided nonpublic schools funding to hire school resource officers. Lawmakers should maintain these critical funding streams for Michigan's nonpublic schools to improve school safety and meet the mental health needs of all students.

Supporting Quality Teachers for All Schools

"Our teachers have gone through the same programs as any other public school teacher ... and then they get paid a lot less, so access to ... that type of thing at the state level or federal level would be also amazing to support. That would be an extra bonus for our teachers."

Brenda Mescher, Principal
St. Charles Borromeo Catholic School,
Coldwater

To address a statewide teacher shortage, the Legislature has supported college students studying to be teachers with state aid worth thousands of dollars annually. However, the programs are only available to student teachers who subsequently teach in public schools. College students who fulfill their student teaching assignments at nonpublic schools should be included in the Student Teacher Stipend Program as well as the Michigan Future Educator Fellowship Program to ensure all students can benefit from quality teachers.

Providing Access to STEM Opportunities

"We are trying to build engineers, and we're trying to build a stronger industry for Michigan. That's not just for someone that is not of a religious mindset; that's for everyone. We're trying to make that universal."

Melissa Doubek, Principal
All Saints Catholic School, Alpena

The state has assisted public and nonpublic schools with participating in FIRST Robotics and Science Olympiad events and competitions. Nonpublic schools have access to \$600,000 annually through a competitive grant program to provide these opportunities for their students. The Legislature should continue to fund these opportunities—which are extracurricular activities and not part of the core curriculum—for nonpublic students.

Supporting All Students, Regardless of School

"These children still are citizens of Michigan who deserve the help ... [Choosing not to go to] a public school does not negate that obligation toward those students."

Melissa Pillifant, Principal
Father Marquette Academy, Marquette

Public policy decisions should be made in the best interests of all Michigan's students, no matter where they attend school. Policies and funding surrounding shared time instruction, teacher certification and professional development, and dual enrollment opportunities impact the 50,000 children in Catholic schools and the 100,000 total students in Michigan nonpublic schools. ■

Continued from page 3. Inspired by the smcc program, the Catholic Foundation of Michigan established the St. Margaret of Castello Granting Fund to ensure children with special needs are given the same opportunity for Catholic education.

“We have embraced the need to raise dollars and educate schools and communities about how important it is to create programs” for those with significant learning differences, said Angela Moloney, president and CEO of the Catholic Foundation of Michigan, which is a lay-led nonprofit that raises money and provides grants to advance Catholic social teaching.

If the number of applicants to the St. Margaret of Castello Granting Fund—named for the patron saint of children with disabilities—is any indication, interest in expanding special education offerings at Catholic schools in Michigan is rising. Moloney said the applicant pool rose from 4–6 applicants to 6–10 applicants over two years.

Catholic Schools Provide a Public Good—Without Public Dollars

Catholic schools are open to and regularly accept non-Catholic students and families, but misperceptions still abound. For instance, Kirschner, principal of Our Lady of the Lake in St. Joseph, said her community includes one family that described themselves as atheist.

Catholic education is not a Catholics-only education ministry. It is a model of formation offered to anyone who desires an education oriented toward growth in virtue for their children. In short, Catholic education is for everyone.

“If you want your children to learn virtue, that’s what we teach here,” said Pillifant, principal of Father Marquette Academy. “If you are looking for an education that will help your child think clearly, communicate effectively, and seek wisdom and truth, that’s our focus here. This place is for you.”

Catholic schools are striving to form saints and scholars without the same resources afforded to other schools. This is why MCC and the Michigan Association of Nonpublic Schools advocate for lawmakers to include or increase funding to support all students, such as funds to ensure all schools are safe.



Students from Father Marquette Catholic Academy in Marquette. Photo provided by school.

For St. Michael School—a rural parish school in Remus, 20 miles west of Mt. Pleasant—without safety grant funding from the state, “we wouldn’t have even gotten started” on implementing “imperative” safety upgrades, said principal Karen Gostomski.

Those upgrades included doorbell and security cameras, new interior doors, safety training for staff and students, and implementing key card access for doors. Yet, the \$30,000 in state grants for which the school applied and another \$45,000 raised by the community have not paid for every safety need, which underscores the importance of continued state investment in safety for all schools.

On top of that, a 92% reduction in state funding to non-public schools for student safety grants “was a huge blow” for St. Michael, Gostomski said, who was counting on another round of funding in the spring of 2025 that never came.

The students who attend Catholic schools are still “citizens of Michigan who deserve the help” of the state, Pillifant said, adding that the decision to attend nonpublic schools “does not negate [the state’s] obligation toward those students.”

Doubek served as a public school educator for 30-plus years before becoming principal of All Saints in Alpena, where she now recognizes the disparity between how public and nonpublic schools are treated in state funding.

“I want children to be safe and healthy, and be able to read, and be productive members of our society that are critical thinkers and problem solvers,” she said. “Those programs that the state funds … should be for all children.” ■



A digital version of this edition of *Focus*, along with footnotes and additional resources not presented here, is available at micatholic.org/schools.