

Rejoice in the Lord

**By Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R.
Archbishop of Newark**

Our Commitment to Catholic Schools



Recently I had to announce one of the most difficult decisions any bishop or pastor ever makes: to close a school. In this case, the closure and consolidation of nine elementary schools and one archdiocesan-sponsored high school here in the Archdiocese of Newark. These school closings were made necessary by the combination of declining enrollment and rising subsidy.

Over the past several years, despite efforts by the Archdiocese and our school administrators to increase enrollment and decrease reliance on archdiocesan subsidy, our situation has become increasingly unsustainable. Late last year, it became clear that difficult choices were needed to safeguard the future of Catholic education. We simply cannot afford to subsidize schools at the current levels. In response, I asked for two plans: one tactical and the other strategic. The question for the tactical plan was what must we do now in order to buy the time necessary for a strategic reorganization, aimed at ensuring that schools not only survive but also flourish. The recently announced closings form a major element of the tactical response.

As I said in my letter accompanying the announcement of this consolidation and closing of Catholic schools, every time a school closes, something irreplaceable is lost. Our Catholic schools are much more than institutions. They are communities of faith and learning, and centers of prayer and service that help families teach their children to be authentic missionary disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because Catholic schools teach the whole person (mind, body and spirit), their contributions to the well-being of each student, and his or her family, reach far beyond the excellent academic programs they offer.

While there is no good time to close a school, we recognize that this announcement is particularly painful during this pandemic. We were in the first phases of the planned closings when the shutdown occurred. With the pandemic continuing as long as it has and because some of the affected schools were already accepting enrollments for the fall, we determined it was best and most respectful to make the announcements now. Furthermore, we knew that further delay of this decision to consolidate our school community would serve only to weaken the entire Catholic

school ministry. If our Archdiocese could not subsidize all the schools at current levels before COVID-19, we will be even less capable once the quarantine eases. This is a reorganization aimed at ensuring that our archdiocesan Catholic schools not simply survive but also flourish.

The Value of Catholic Schools

Catholic schools contribute directly to the health and vitality of the Church in northern New Jersey. Along with parish religious education programs, youth ministry and other means of lifelong faith formation and education, our 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 us to look beyond our 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 even one of our schools closes. Research conducted by scholars at The Catholic University of America confirms what most of us know already. When a Catholic school closes, it is almost always because of finances. But what the research also tells us is that we don't have to accept school closings as inevitable. We can help our schools 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.

I want all our Catholic schools to demonstrate a vibrant, hope-filled spirit that proclaims to the whole world that Christ is alive and active—in our homes, in our parishes and school communities and in our world. I want every Catholic school in our archdiocese to be a vibrant community of faith that is carrying out the teaching ministry of Jesus in ways that are visible, transformative and service-oriented.

What are the fundamental characteristics of a Catholic school? What constitutes a school's "Catholic identity"?

It's not the externals—the crucifixes on the classroom walls, the pictures and statues of the saints, the habits worn by the Sisters and Brothers or the little boxes or rice bowls used to collect money for the missions. These are important physical symbols (sacramentals) that remind us of deeper truths, but they are not the essential things that make a school Catholic.

There are several different ways to describe Catholic identity. I like to concentrate on three fundamentals. These are: evangelization, catechesis and social justice. Let me say a few words about each of these essential elements of a school's Catholic identity.

First of all, a Catholic school must witness in a public way to the person of Jesus Christ and to His message (evangelization). Catholic schools exist to proclaim the Gospel. Everything in the school—its curriculum, its liturgies and retreats, its sports activities, and its service programs—should provide students (also staff and families) with opportunities to encounter the person of Jesus

Christ, to become His disciples and to proclaim to the whole world our salvation in Him. The symbols I mentioned earlier remind us, and assist us, in our evangelizing mission, but the most important element in a school's Catholic identity is its commitment to make Christ present to everyone who attends the school or who comes into contact with it.

Secondly, a Catholic school must teach the Catholic faith (catechesis). The mystery of God, as revealed to us by the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, is the primary content of a Catholic education. Everything else that we teach—as part of a genuine commitment to educational excellence—is an elaboration on the wonders of God's creation and the history of our salvation. All the academic disciplines reveal in partial and preliminary ways the working of the Holy Spirit in our world from the beginning of time. The more we learn about math and science, diverse languages and cultures, and the ups and downs of world history and the history of our local communities, the more we discover that the teachings of our Church, as contained in Scripture and in our Catholic tradition, represent the truth, the way things really are. Schools that are truly Catholic are vibrant learning environments that promote curiosity and an openness to new ways of living and learning.

Finally, in order to be truly Catholic, a school must teach its students and all members of the school community to reach out to others and accept responsibility for the well-being of all God's creation (social justice). Catholic schools do not exist for their own sakes. They exist for the good of their students and the communities they serve. Frequently, a Catholic school is an “anchor” in its neighborhood, a source of stability and moral integrity. There are socio-economic reasons for this anchor effect, but more fundamentally, a school that is truly Catholic serves its neighborhood and community because of its recognition that we cannot love God as we should unless we also love our neighbor. Social justice is a constitutive element of the Gospel. That means it must also be a constitutive element of the curriculum and the daily life of every Catholic school.

Evangelization, catechesis and social justice are essential to a school's Catholic identity. Everything about a Catholic school must give witness to the teaching and the message of Jesus Christ. Catholic teaching must be integrated into every aspect of the school's curriculum and programs. And the school must help its students reach out beyond parish and school boundaries to serve the needs of others.

We need a greater sense of co-responsibility for the Church's educational mission

A school is Catholic when it recognizes that it is called to accomplish these fundamental objectives, but in the end, parents need to be convinced that the faith formation provided by a Catholic school is worth sacrificing for. This is a critically important question in the more affluent areas of the Archdiocese, where there is a high-quality academic formation in the public schools. Some of the schools slated to close are in those affluent areas, yet they still required an astonishingly high subsidy to remain open.

What is clear to me is the perennial value of Catholic schools as well as the urgent need to rethink the current model of school management. However, this rethinking must happen in close dialogue with parents – but also with pastors and the full community of missionary disciples. We need a

greater sense of co-responsibility for the educational mission of the Church, especially our duty to transmit the faith to the new generations.

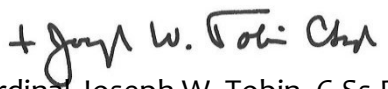
This is a crucial time for the sustainability and success of our Catholic schools, which are, and will continue to be, a priority for the Archdiocese of Newark. A greater focus on revitalizing local Catholic education is needed. Our evangelizing mission must be prioritized and enhanced, working with local parishes and the Church as a whole to address school enrollment, Mass attendance, active participation in the Catholic faith, and the financial health of all our schools.

Our Road Ahead

The roadmap for the future of Catholic education in the Archdiocese of Newark is clear. It embraces the archdiocesan vision of “**Forward in Faith Together: Our Road Ahead.**” It brings our system of Catholic schools and Catholic education back into the minds and hearts of Catholics throughout this archdiocese. We must intensify our efforts to build a sustainable future, establish vital schools, and uphold our mission of providing the highest possible quality education filled with Catholic faith and the values of Jesus.

We renew our commitment to Catholic education in the Archdiocese of Newark. Despite our challenges, there continues to be demand for Catholic education, and many examples of thriving schools. We are proud of what our Archdiocesan schools, students, teachers, and staff members have accomplished over the years. Even as we mourn the loss of these ten schools, we hope to shape a better future.

Please join me in praying for all our Catholic school communities, and especially for all our students and their families in this time of worldwide crisis.


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To read Cardinal Tobin’s letter concerning school closings, visit
www.rcan.org/letter-faithful-cardinal-joseph-w-tobin-cssr.

To read the archdiocesan announcement, visit www.rcan.org/archdiocese-newark-announces-consolidation-school-community-and-closure-10-catholic-schools.

A Message from Pope Francis: Words of Challenge and Hope



In a particular way, Catholic educational institutions have the mission of offering horizons that are open to transcendence so that Catholic education can make a difference by cultivating spiritual values in young people. The culture of indifference, which envelops relations between individuals and peoples, as well as the care of the common home, also corrodes the sense of humanism.

A synergy of the various educational realities is needed to confront this challenge and particularly requires working with families where one learns to come out of one's self and place oneself in front of the other, to listen, to share, to support, to respect, to help, to coexist. Catholic educational institutions are called to build a humanism that proposes a vision of society centered on the human person and his or her inalienable rights and capable of instilling a soul in the same economic progress so that it may be aimed at the promotion of every man and woman in their entirety.

Catholic schools are distinguished by the Christian inspiration of their communities helping them to include the moral, spiritual and religious dimension in their curriculums and to value the achievements of science and technology from the perspective of the human person as a whole. Behind the Catholic teacher there is a believing community, in which, throughout the centuries of its existence, a certain wisdom of life has matured; a community that conserves within it a treasure trove of knowledge and ethical experience that is important for all humanity.

This humanistic perspective today cannot fail to include ecological education, which promotes a covenant between humanity and the environment, at the different levels of ecological balance: the interior one with one's self, the one in solidarity with others, the natural one with all living beings and the spiritual one with God.

My Prayer for You

Especially during this month of May, as we continue to struggle with the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, let's turn to Mary, Our Lady of Perpetual Help. May her intercession give comfort and encouragement to all students, families, teachers and staff who have been effected by school closures and consolidation in our Archdiocese. May the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph, who nurtured and formed the child Jesus in their family home in Nazareth, guide us as we work to educate all our children in faith, hope and loving service. †



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