

Catholic Schools Week: What is the impact of Catholic education? Part 1



It's Catholic Schools Week.

This celebration at the end of January each year provides the opportunity for me to look back and give thanks for the gift of Catholic education in my life from both sides of the desk. Our Catholic schools have had a tremendous impact on the lives of students for generations.

I asked around and got some personal feedback from people of all ages. Here's what they had to say:

On the other side of the desk: God is still by my side:

Jessica Baldrige Smythe, a 2002 graduate of The John Carroll School, chuckles whenever she shares that her school history is full of Johns: She attended grade school at St. John the Evangelist in Hydes, high school at John Carroll, followed by Neumann College (named for St. John Neumann).

She "broke the trend" with graduate work at the College of Notre Dame of Maryland. Now Jessica is a second grade teacher at St. Joseph School in Fullerton, Baltimore County, where her students love her.

Jessica told me, "Catholic Schools made a huge difference in my life because I didn't have to go through anything without God right by my side. I continue my spiritual

journey by teaching in a Catholic School now. I hope to give the children in my class the same positive experience that I received since I was 5 years old."

Family-like sense of community:

Justin, a John Carroll junior, told me that being in a Catholic school can be summed up in one word: Family. He explains, "This school is truly a community."

Shawn, a sophomore who has attended Catholic schools all his life, agrees: "I think going to a Catholic school has not only helped me academically, but also socially. I feel like I have a deeper and closer connection with all my peers."

Tangwei, a freshman from China, just started studying for the second semester at John Carroll this month. He lives in St. Joseph Hall, the on-campus dorm, and told me: "It's good to study in a Catholic school because the students and teachers are friendly."

David is a sophomore who attended St. Joan of Arc School in Aberdeen for six years before coming to high school. He shared: "Being in a Catholic school has provided a safe and friendly learning environment for me. I believe Catholic education will help me get into a good college so I may start my life with a good job and, hopefully, a lifelong career."

Years of deep gratitude:

Emily is a junior who attended St. Joseph School in Fullerton before John Carroll: "I have had many Catholic Schools Weeks from going to St. Joe's for so many years. I personally love it. We have a lot to be thankful for and it is nice to have a week to show that appreciation to everyone who deserves it."

Emily reflected on Monday's Grandparents Day and on Teacher Appreciation Day on Tuesday: "It's easy to say that we appreciate our teachers and all they do, but to have a whole day to actually show them is different, and I think it means a lot to them. It's also really nice that we take a day to appreciate our grandparents and parents, and this is honestly my favorite day. The fact that they have made so many sacrifices to be able to send us to a Catholic School often goes unrecognized by a lot of the students, and it is nice to spend a day with them to show how much it means

and what we are getting from the sacrifices they have made.”

“Catholic education is very important to me because God has had a huge impact on my life throughout the years. Praying and being thankful is one thing, but learning about everything that He has done for me, just makes me that much more grateful. Having a class where we can discuss God and different morals makes you think a lot about other people’s opinions and thoughts which you don’t get in a math or science class. I feel like we are a true family at John Carroll.”

The first in her family to attend Catholic school:

Sophomore Denny shared her love for Catholic education with me: “Catholic schools means a lot to me. I’m the first in my family to go to a Catholic school. Before John Carroll, I knew almost nothing about Catholicism or my own faith. I didn’t know what saints were or who the Pope was. Now I can’t imagine going to a school where you don’t pray every day. I love going to classes and being able to share my prayer intentions with everyone and know there is a support group. JC really does feel like a family.”

Denny reflected back to eighth grade at her public middle school when there were two deaths that impacted her that year, one was a friend and the other, the sibling of another friend. “I had to find support outside of my school community. However, at John Carroll, the death of a student or family member truly brings the school together.... Overall, I am very proud to be part of a Catholic school and I wouldn’t change it for the world.”

Friends, teachers, and a mastery of grammar:

Talia Kahoe of the John Carroll Class of 2012, also attended St. Margaret School, and is very passionate about Catholic education: “I tell people all the time how grateful I am to have gone through 12 years of Catholic schools. Apart from the actual education, I can proudly say that I knew every single person in my graduating class. This is incredible. Even during my senior year I was making new friends and learning from so many different people, as opposed to getting overwhelmed by large crowds and cliques.”

Talia agrees that teachers in Catholic schools are a huge part of the incredible impact on students' lives: "I need to touch on the relationships I made in high school with the faculty. There are so many inspirational individuals at John Carroll, and I'm thankful every single day for who I have become because of them."

Talia smiling told me that her grammar skills, mastered from years of Catholic education, are notably impressive to her classmates in college: "Such a little thing I haven't really appreciated until I got to college."

Strong Catholic values taught by spiritual role models:

Megan Early Brady, a graduate of St. Margaret School, John Carroll, and the University of Scranton, cherishes her Catholic education and is proud to be raising her children in the faith and sending them to Catholic schools in North Carolina.

"It is worth every bit of sacrifice to provide our children an environment that nurtures their spiritual development through lectures, critical thinking, service to others, and most significantly, by example. Even the smallest preschoolers absorb the message."

Megan went on to share a story about her sons: "One afternoon, after I had admonished my youngest son for interrupting a conversation, my middle son told him 'when you interrupt, you are stealing. And that is breaking a commandment!' I was perplexed and seriously had no idea what he was talking about. He went on to explain to me that when you interrupt two people in a conversation, you steal two things: the time of the person who is speaking, and the attention of the person who is listening.

Megan went to explain: "How did my six year-old come up with this? How did he gain this wisdom? The answer: his GYM teacher!" It seems that children in her son's class were talking and not listening to the Gym teacher's instructions one day, so "she taught them. She used the moment to teach them a lesson about the value of respecting other people's time and attention."

"In my opinion the most marked difference between a Catholic and secular education is that the Catholic values permeate... There is a higher standard for the

faculty, staff, and students—a common understanding that we are holy, by the Biblical definition, ‘different.’ Our ultimate authority is not the principal, or the dean of students, or the university president. It is Him. And as such, we act in ways that reflect we are Catholic—we demonstrate we are holy, different.”

Fostering Vocations:

From IND to the Daughters of Charity:

Sister Amanda Kern, a 2003 graduate of the Institute of Notre Dame in Baltimore, told me that she never would have become a Daughter of Charity if it weren’t for Catholic schools.

“I didn’t attend Catholic school until high school. Although I didn’t become a School Sister of Notre Dame, seeing these Sisters at IND and their daily work was a “tug” from God that maybe that might one day be an option. Simply being in a Catholic school with such a loving environment was a support when I began discerning religious life.”

After her graduation from IND, Amanda went on to study at Mount St. Mary’s University and then did several years of fulltime service work before she entered the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul.

Sister Amanda shared that while attending IND, “I saw real poverty for the very first time, which was the first domino that led me to join a community whose whole focus is service of the poor.”

Our prayers are with this fine young woman during these important seminary formation years, and now as she prepares for her upcoming ‘apostolic experience’ of living and working fulltime for six weeks with the Daughters in Utica, New York starting in late March. You are in our prayers!!

The Influence of the Sisters of Mercy:

Deacon Kevin Reid is certain that his vocation as a Permanent Deacon came from his

eight years of grade school with the Sisters of Mercy in the 1960s at St. Peter School in Warwick, Rhode Island. “They were an example to each of us of faithful service to the Lord and to us students. They gave their life’s vocation to each of us.”

Deacon Kevin has made use of his God-given gifts and talents, as encouraged by the good Sisters, with his service to the Archdiocese of Baltimore at Immaculate Conception Church in Towson, as well as over the years professionally as a chef. He is now ‘blending’ ministry and the sharing of good food in his new position at the residence of the Archbishop of Baltimore, with meals and events with Archbishop Lori and his guests. Food for the body and soul!!

How have Catholic schools impacted and influenced you?

Email me with your reflections: pattimurphydohn@gmail.com

In Part 2: I will share how Catholic schools have impacted my life and what I think is missing in Catholic education today. Stay tuned.

