

From the Notebook: Q&A with Our Lady of Grace principal

Now in her second year as principal of Our Lady of Grace in Parkton, Alberta “Byrdie” Ricketts is excited about the possibilities of Catholic education. A product of Archdiocese of Baltimore schools, Ricketts spent about 30 years in the public school system as a teacher and administrator.

She sat down with The Catholic Review Aug. 25 for an interview on the first day of school. She addressed many of the challenges facing Catholic schools and what her 213-student institution is doing to remain viable. She explained her administrative philosophy as well.

Catholic Review: Has this last year given you new insight into the importance of Catholic education?

Ricketts: I have always known Catholic education is extremely important because I am a product of it. I went to St. John in Westminster from first grade through 12th. You are in an environment where the belief system is there. I knew Catholic education is wonderful. At this stage, I find it exceptionally exciting because in the public arena I could always live my faith, but I couldn't speak it. The values were always there, but I was always praying behind closed doors. Here, I can do it out in the open, I can counsel using (God's) name, praise him, and I can share my strong faith with the staff and the children. Really, it's a higher level and it's more me. It's been a great blessing. I really feel he put me here. It's been the best year of my life.

Catholic Review: You seemed as excited as anyone about the first day when you were meeting families before school.

Ricketts: Relationships that you build with people are extremely important in making them aware that you feel they are important and they are a part of the school. They might not be sitting in classrooms, but they are definitely a part of the school. It's really a team effort. The joy and the silliness, that's wonderful. I try to mix that in a good bit. The idea of truly enjoying life is good. He wants to have a good time and to be happy.

I want children to be happy here. I want them to love coming here and share themselves with each other. One of my biggest challenges is to keep the children from the fifth and sixth grade because of their options. You have an option of staying here and graduating from Our Lady of Grace, which is a very small, close community or going to another Catholic school. If you're thinking of that Catholic school for high school, some think they should try now. Then you have some who are leaving who go to the public arena, and they want to do it in the middle school level because they want more friends and a larger arena to choose those friends. If they're not happy, they shouldn't be here. That's not what we're about. We're 'happy, celebrating people' here. Our middle school tends to have fewer children.

We have really good schools in the neighborhood, so we have to stay on the top of things and be really strong to keep them. It's a challenge, but we're doing well I think.

Catholic Review: That's a struggle many schools are facing...

Ricketts: Marketing is extremely important. Word of mouth is extremely important. We get a lot of 'somebody told me.' You've got to keep the families happy, because if they're talking negative, it does phenomenal damage. We want them to be glad they're sending their children here. We want them to go out and say, 'Our Lady of Grace is a wonderful place!' If somebody's out there hunting, that helps.

Catholic Review: A lot of schools are worried about enrollment numbers and are trying to figure out what to do...

Ricketts: It's scary. This may sound corny and I don't mean it to be, but it's out of your hands. You can't make people come. What you can do is try to make people delighted with what you have. The economy is a large piece. Our tuition assistance (requests) increased three-fold this year. We have to also be aware of what's going on. People love this school, but if they have no money to send (children) to school, what are they going to do? I'm hoping that's on its way out.

Catholic Review: What do the school and parish do to address that?

Ricketts: Families give us information about what they can relatively afford, then we have a team that I'm not involved in and looks at it to see what we can offer. An offer is made. The parents can accept it or not.

Catholic Review: You started the day with your staff members by saying a prayer. How important is it to set a tone of unity for the year?

Ricketts: A team is extremely important since we are a small school. We only have one teacher in each grade. It's hard to be the only one there, so what I try to do is build teamwork through vertical teams. The (Kindergarten), 1 and 2 work as a team, then 3,4 and 5 and 6, 7 and 8. They have a team leader so that if I have something to ask to get a feel for the climate, I'll go to that one team leader. They have meetings and do things together as a group. Teamwork is one of the best ways to get that good feel.