

ALL SAINTS CATHOLIC ACADEMY: THE
FUTURE OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION?

by Mark Jury

When Sister Eileen Jude, SSJ, principal of All Saints Catholic Academy in Bayonne, New Jersey, walks through the gleaming hallways of the two-year-old school she bristles with pride at the accomplishments that have taken place.

"This year's eighth grade class has earned almost \$500,000--half a million dollars!--in scholarships," she exults. "The students took the High School Placement Test and the scholarships just rolled in." Passing the sports trophy case, she says, "The All Saints Boys Varsity team won the Bayonne City League Basketball Championship--the first time in 20 years a Catholic school has accomplished that feat." Then there is the tech savvy Smart Boards in every classroom--reducing the once ubiquitous blackboard to only occasional use as a place to post notices.

When Sister Eileen was considering the principal's position, however, and read the job description, the first thought that popped into her mind was, "What nut cake would do this?" The Diocese of Bayonne was down to four elementary schools--all running major deficits and losing students. Three schools had been closed earlier. Now the plan was to close all the existing schools and merge them into one super school, a decision that was fraught with the potential for upheaval

from both students and parents who were fiercely protective and loyal to their individual parish schools.

When Sister Eileen learned more about the bold plan that was being initiated, she became intrigued. "I realized what they were trying to do with All Saints Catholic Academy is the future of Catholic education," she said. "All Saints would rest on the foundation of all seven original heritage schools and keep Catholic education as a viable option in Bayonne--and make sure this option exists for our children's children."

Bayonne, New Jersey sits on a peninsula where its busy docks overlook the Statue of Liberty--and whose toughness and heart was personified by its hometown hero, Chuck Wepner, a.k.a The Bayonne Brawler, who went all 15 rounds with Muhammad Ali and was the inspiration for the film *Rocky*. Generations of immigrants settled in Bayonne and each group built their own churches. For over 100 years there were eight parishes in Bayonne with seven thriving elementary Catholic schools.

By 2006, however, three of the heritage schools had been closed and the remaining four were in trouble. The traditional wisdom was to merge into two schools of 250 students each--but if the new merged schools kept losing children, Bayonne would soon be down to one school.

"The plan to merge the four schools into one large Catholic elementary school in Bayonne came from the pastors of the remaining heritage schools," said Bishop Thomas Donato, Auxiliary Bishop, Diocese of Bayonne, "and then all the

parish pastors in the deanery signed on with their full support. With the leadership together we immediately brought in the laity to become fully involved so they couldn't say that the decision to close and merge the schools was made 'On High.'"

"The decision wasn't an easy one," recalled Monsignor Paul Schetelick, associate pastor of St. Andrew's Church and Juridic pastor of All Saints Catholic Academy. " We would be dealing with the emotional loss of a parish grammar school and losing the identity of the students--coupled with building a new school spirit. There were naysayers, of course. but we were blessed and we had a lot of help."

"The decision to close and merge all the schools into one new Catholic school came about from us in the City of Bayonne," said Bishop Donato, "and then the Office of the Superintendent of Schools of the Archdiocese of Newark created the process to implement the plan and we filled in the blanks." All Saints Catholic Academy chose the deanery option, becoming the first deanery school in the Archdiocese of Newark.

Colleen Mernar, an eighth grader at All Saints, remembered "they sent home letters from church that said we had to box everything up at school."

" I was kind of scared at first," said Dana Cotter, also an eighth grader. "Then I realized that I already knew a lot of the kids that would be going to the new school. But I still wanted to stay in my old school."

All Saints Catholic Academy opened with 500 students on July 1, 2008 as the only Catholic elementary school in Bayonne, New Jersey. Economies of scale provided immediate benefits to the students. "Because of the size of the new school and the funds available, the entire curriculum was updated," said Sr. Eileen. "New technology is available to the students. Language arts programs

were implemented--this year we've introduced Italian along with Spanish. If our children are bi-lingual their opportunities to be marketable in the future soar."

Dana Cotter is now very comfortable in her new school, saying, "Being at All Saints has opened our horizons more." Colleen Mernar added, "Merging all the schools into one school really brought the whole community together. We learned to make new friends because we had to make new friends. When we get to high school this fall it will be a piece of cake making friends."

Students at All Saints Catholic Academy also benefit from "a priestly presence that is almost unheard of," according to Sister Eileen, "which helps us immensely with Faith formation which has such a positive effect on the children."

Bayonne priests teach classes at All Saints and Father James Manos from St. Vincent's Church specializes in guidance. "Our students are in a program at St. Peter's Prep, and one of the kids--not ours--in the group committed suicide," said Sister Eileen. "Having a priest in the school to provide counseling to the students experiencing such a traumatic event in their lives was invaluable."

The priests of all eight Bayonne parishes--Our Lady of Assumption, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, St. Andrew, St. Henry, St. Mary Star of the Sea, St. Vincent de Paul, St. Joseph and St. Michael--also support All Saints as if it were their own school on site.

A central piece of the All Saints Catholic Academy plan is fundraising to create an endowment. Led by a robust Home School Association and a strong and committed Board of Advisors, a full calendar of events has generated substantial income--with more innovative development strategies in the works.

"For almost 100 years there were eight parishes and seven schools in Bayonne and each school was filled," " said Sister Eileen. "We have literally hundreds of thousands of graduates of Bayonne Catholic schools and if we can tap that population--to remember their roots and their foundation as Catholic school students--we have a tremendous fundraising opportunity to offset budget increases."

While the Catholic community in Bayonne confidently looks to the future of education in their city, Bishop Donato recently took a moment to reflect.

"A number of parents weren't too optimistic about the success of the school and they came to me and the priests and conveyed their concerns," recalled the Bishop. "Recently one of those parents said to me, 'I was one of those who weren't happy with the merge and I want to tell you how very happy I am now. And how very proud I am of All Saints Catholic Academy.'"

"With all the well-deserved success All Saints is enjoying, I just want to share that," added the Bishop. "It was very tough for some of our parishioners in the beginning."

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