The Importance of our Urban Catholic Schools

Eugene Trani - September 18, 2018

These are difficult times for the Catholic Church in America. With the release of the Pennsylvania Grand Jury report, all Catholics are dismayed and unsettled and look for our church to reach out to those who were violated and exploited and punish those who violated and exploited them. That, however, is not the subject of tonight’s presentation.

Tonight we will talk about another subject of concern for our church. Though not nearly as important as the events I just mentioned, it is nonetheless significant and worthy of concern and examination. That topic is Catholic schools in the United States, and especially urban Catholic schools with a particular focus on the Richmond Metropolitan area. I will make some general remarks, and then introduce Wanda Wallin, Principal of All Saints Catholic School in North Richmond, and Joseph Whitmore, Principal of St. Joseph Catholic School in Petersburg. Before doing that, I would like to acknowledge a special supporter of these schools -- Mr. Marcus Weinstein, who along with his wife, Carole, have been generous benefactors of both All Saints and St. Joseph.

I am what is sometimes called a “Cradle Catholic.” I grew up in the Philadelphia area. I attended St. Laurence Catholic School in Upper Darby, graduated from Holy Cross Catholic School in Springfield in 1953, graduated from Monsignor Bonner Catholic High School in 1957, and then the University of Notre Dame in 1961. My wonderful wife, Lois, to whom I have been happily married to since 1962, is a 1953 graduate of St. John’s Catholic School in Collingswood, New Jersey, Camden Catholic High School in 1957, and Misericordia Hospital School of Nursing in Philadelphia in 1960. We both benefited enormously from our Catholic education. My father, who as an infant came to the United States from Sicily, graduated from Cornell’s College of Engineering in 1927. Growing up, all I ever wanted to do was attend Cornell, but in 1957, Archbishop John O’Hara (later Cardinal John O’Hara), made it difficult to get transcripts from Catholic High Schools in the Philadelphia archdiocese sent to non-Catholic universities. After an appeal to the Bishop, I was eventually admitted to Cornell, but by then Notre Dame became my first choice and it was a decision I have never regretted. After a number of stops for teaching and administration for me and nursing and anesthesia for Lois, we came to Richmond and VCU in 1990 and have been parishioners at the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart ever since then.

Over the years, I got reengaged with Notre Dame and noted that Notre Dame had become very concerned about Catholic schools, especially in the urban centers of our country. Notre Dame set up the Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) which places ND graduates, and in recent years, other universities, in struggling schools, for a two year term, with summers at ND, and awards a Masters degree at the end of their service. The Richmond area has benefited from a number of ACE fellows, especially at All Saints and St. Joseph. All of this led me to take a great interest in All Saints, which ten
years ago was struggling and threatened with closure. The late Bishop Francis DiLorenzo made a commitment to give All Saints five years to change its viability, and as you will hear, that has happened.

In the meantime, I discovered a new book, in 2014, published by The University of Chicago Press, written by two University of Notre Dame Law School professors, Margaret Brinig and Nicole Stelle Garnett, entitled, Lost Classroom, Lost Community: Catholic Schools’ Importance in Urban America. Positively reviewed by Michael Sean Winters in the National Catholic Reporter and by Nathan Glazer in Education NEXT, the authors analyze Catholic schools in two major urban areas, Chicago and Philadelphia. In Chicago, 130 Catholic schools were closed or merged between 1984 and 2004, and the Chicago Archdiocese, which educated 300,000 students in 1965, was down to 87,000 in 2012. Much the same story is true in Philadelphia.

In the past two decades, 1,600 Catholic Schools have closed, displacing 300,000 students. In Philadelphia, in January, 2012, Archbishop Charles Chaput announced closure of 44 elementary schools and 4 high schools, displacing 24,000 students. In four years prior to 2012, Philadelphia closed 30 schools.

In Philadelphia, in 1911 and 2011, 68,000 students enrolled, with the peak in 1961, with 250,000. Total enrollment in Catholic schools nationally fell from 5.2 million in 1961 to 2.1 million in 2011.

At a 2008 gathering of community and educational policy leaders in D.C., the conference learned that “when the school closes, the neighborhood just isn’t the same.” Brinig and Garnett conclude that “Catholic elementary schools are important generators of social capital in urban neighborhoods.” School closures precede elevated levels of crime and disorder and suppressed levels of social cohesion. Open Catholic schools have lower levels of serious crime in their neighborhoods.

Catholic schools matter to urban neighborhoods not only as educational institutions, but also as community contributors. School-choice programs are essential for survival of Catholic schools, and tuition vouchers or tax credits do matter.

In the second half of the 20th Century, as Catholics become wealthier and entered the American mainstream and African Americans began to move into ethnic Catholic neighborhoods, the suburbanization of urban Catholics had devastating consequences for urban parochial schools.

In 1950, 90% of teachers in Catholic schools were religious sisters. Today, less than 5% are.
First wave of Catholic school closures began in the late 1960s. The number of Catholic schools in the U.S. fell from 13,000 in 1960 to 7,000 in 2010. Percentage of students being educated by Catholic schools went from 12% in 1965 to 5% in 2010. Between 2000 and 2006, six hundred Catholic schools closed (nearly 7% of the total.)

Charter Schools have become very prevalent – 6700 charter schools opened between 1992 and 2012, and 1036 were closed. Charter schools must be secular – prohibited from teaching religion. Not as strong as Catholic schools as anchor of neighborhoods.

Neighborhoods where Catholic school closures occur will be less socially cohesive and more disorderly than neighborhoods with viable schools.

The Wall Street Journal’s Editorial Board wrote in June about “The Catholic School Difference.” Citing a recent study, the WSJ noted that there is “statistically meaningful evidence that students in Catholic schools exhibited less disruptive behavior than their counterparts in other schools.” The WSJ reports that the study notes it is a “tragedy for the nation” that so many Catholic schools continue to close when they are most needed.

What about the Richmond diocese, which includes all of Virginia except the Northern part of the state. The national declines are found also in our diocese, with attendance declining 21% from 11,173 in 1999-2000 to 8,827 in 2017-2018. While African-American enrollments in Catholic elementary schools in the diocese have declined by 57% from 948 to 543 between 2000-2018, Hispanic enrollments have increased 488% from 186 to 908. The so-called Segura movement, which promotes the enrollment of Hispanics in Catholic Schools, is perhaps the most important change in the last decade, with many Hispanic Catholics recognizing that a Catholic education for their children is possible.

We have to work hard to keep Catholic education healthy in our diocese. Let us now examine two schools that are typical of the kind of schools shut in other parts of the United States. It is my pleasure to introduce the principals of All Saints and St. Joseph:

- **Mrs. Wanda Wallin** became principal of All Saints Catholic School on July 1, 2013. A graduate of the College of William and Mary with a Master’s in K-8 Education, Mrs. Wallin taught for fifteen years before receiving her certification in School Administration from George Washington University.

- **Mr. Joseph Whitmore** is principal of Saint Joseph Catholic School, which offers academic programs from Junior Kindergarten through 8th grade school. He is passionate about developing a positive school community with a strong focus on faith and academics. Mr. Whitmore received his Master’s degree in Administration and Supervision for the University of Virginia.
Five years ago, I was given an opportunity to become the principal of All Saints Catholic School. While I had taught and served in leadership roles in two other private schools, one Catholic and one Episcopal, I realize now that I had no idea how joining the All Saints family would change my life or how much a school could change the lives of others. I quickly learned that All Saints, like so many other Catholic schools across the nation, had been in serious danger of closing and was struggling to build enrollment so that it could pay off debt and become sustainable for many years to come.

I am pleased to announce that today, we are well on our way to sustainability and I’d like to share our journey with you. All Saints, a PK – 8th grade school, began in 1982 when St. Paul’s parish school (with a predominantly Caucasian student population) and St. Elizabeth’s parish school (with a predominantly African-American student population) combined. While it was the hope of the diocese that the two student bodies would merge together, that did not happen and within a few years, All Saints’ student body was 98% black and roughly 90% non-Catholic. In 2004, St. Patrick’s parish school (in the Church Hill area of Richmond) closed and merged with All Saints. From 1982 to 2008, All Saints enjoyed a healthy enrollment but the recession of 2008 had tremendous impact on the All Saints’ families and the school’s enrollment went from well over two hundred students to 100 students. Then principal, Ken Soistman, remembers clearly those years when closing the school was a strong consideration for the diocese. However, God had other plans.

Mr. Soistman, now our school president, and I often say that All Saints is open today because of a perfect storm effect. Many people and circumstances have contributed to the re-building of All Saints.

At the peak of the recession, teachers and administrators unselfishly agreed to take pay cuts and Mr. Soistman and Dr. Trani met by chance (or more likely via God) and a plan emerged that involved some generous donors who gave All Saints financial backing which allowed for a bank loan and time for re-growth. Additionally, several local deacons and community members became involved on the school advisory board and the diocese provided a Catholic consultant to work with the school on strategic planning.

Around this same time, Bishop Di Lorenzo, began the Segura initiative, a program whose goal is to make a private Catholic education affordable for Hispanic Catholics worshiping in our parishes. All Saints accepted eleven students under this program. This was a bold step as many were not optimistic about how the Hispanic students would intermix with the school’s predominantly black student population and there was concern about how to provide for the b needs of the students given the school had extremely limited resources. In addition, most of the families could pay very little for tuition. Fortunately, the diocese was able to add to the tuition assistance that All Saints was offering to help cover student costs through the parish sharing program and the McMahon Parater Scholarship Foundation. In 2012, All Saints was able
to hire a part time Director of Development and Marketing who has helped to better brand our school and dramatically increase school fundraising. Today we have 45 Hispanic children at All Saints.

All Saints is located in a neighborhood with many young families who are sending their children to the local public elementary school which has a good reputation. For many years, the school has opened the playground to its neighbors and now those neighbors are beginning to consider All Saints as a viable option which has helped to increase our Caucasian population. Today, All Saints is 55% African-American, 25% Hispanic and 20% Caucasian. We are 40% Catholic and 60% non-Catholic. We love our diversity because it is representative of today’s global society and it is part of what makes us unique among the private schools in Richmond. We also love that we serve generations of families who believe strongly in the power of a Catholic school education. Some may question how we uphold a Catholic identity with a student body that is 60% non-Catholic, but we believe that the mission of our Catholic school is to serve all of God’s children, and our community will be enriched and strengthened by young adults anchored in Christ’s love for each other.

Another element of the perfect storm was the introduction of Virginia’s Education Improvement Scholarship Tax Credit program. This program provides donors with a 65% tax credit on each dollar given to qualifying schools. Tax credit donations allow us to fulfill our mission of making Catholic education affordable for most families as it allows us to provide tuition assistance to families at 300% of poverty or lower. It costs All Saints over $9500 to educate one child. Our tuition this year is $6900, so we annually have a deficit between per pupil cost and monies paid for tuition. Additionally, 65% of our families receive tuition assistance, some paying as low as $1200 per year for tuition. We even have a few students whose tuition is paid in full by Mr. Marcus Weinstein of Weinstein Properties, who believes strongly in providing opportunities for success to those who may not have the means themselves. Without the assistance of generous donors contributing to operating expenses, special projects and the tax credit program, All Saints would not exist.

As mentioned, during the recession, the school’s enrollment plummeted from approximately 200 students to 100 students. Today, we have 197 students. We accept children with varying intellectual abilities but do screen for behavior issues. We also partner with Peter Paul Center in the East End of Richmond to offer opportunities to qualifying low-income families to send a child to All Saints and we continue to promote the Segura program for Hispanic families. We also strive to offer a rigorous curriculum that integrates the arts, technology, and 21st century skills so that all of our students have opportunities equal to students in wealthier schools. We are proud that data shows that 100% of our graduates complete high school and over 90% go on to college. Such statistics are unheard of in the public schools. Additionally, our graduates are being accepted into city and county competitive specialty high schools, international baccalaureate programs, governor’s schools, technical schools and other private and Catholic high schools. We can share numerous stories of young people who took advantage of the opportunity afforded them at All Saints to make a better life for themselves and their families. One young lady, Claudia, was among the first eleven Hispanic students to attend All Saints. Upon graduation, she attended the Advanced College Academy at Tucker High School which allowed her to graduate from high school with an associate’s degree and two years of college complete. She is the first in her family to attend college. There are many other success stories of All Saints graduates – some like Claudia, defeat challenging circumstances such as language barriers or financial hardships to achieve
success and others capitalize on the opportunities afforded to them through our rigorous academic curriculum and enriching extra-curricular programs.

While All Saints is not completely out of danger of being closed, we believe we have been blessed by many and are in a much better position now to continue our mission in the city of Richmond. We have paid off our debts and are working to set aside money for the future sustainability of the school. We are beholden to our staff and teachers who work tirelessly on lower salaries than their public school counterparts to love, encourage and academically and spiritually bolster our students. We must not stop here. Our annual development goals are lofty and meeting these goals is crucial to continuing the mission. The tax credit program has recently come under attack by some state delegates and we must fight to preserve this program as our graduation statistics prove the positive impact the program has for students and families at and below 300% of poverty. The tax credit program is not only crucial for All Saints but for many other private schools across Virginia, including right here in the Richmond diocese. As Dr. Trani pointed out, the authors of Lost Classroom, Lost Community give clear evidence that Catholic schools have an impact on not only the children they serve but on the communities in which they exist. Given this is the case, I believe it is important that communities work to keep urban Catholic schools alive, and All Saints is grateful that the Richmond community has done just that for our school, thus our perfect storm.

Our statistics tell a powerful story – a school with 38% of its students at 300% of poverty level or lower and 100% graduate high school and 95% go on to college. All Saints and its predecessors, St. Paul’s, St. Elizabeth’s, and St. Patrick’s have equipped thousands of young people with the best tools possible to prepare them for their future role as faithful Christians, responsible citizens, productive professionals and caring employees. All Saints hopes to continue to ensure that such an education is available and affordable to all students regardless of race, religion or socio-economic status.

Thank you for listening to our story this afternoon.
Good evening, everyone. My name is Joseph Whitmore and I am the Principal of Saint Joseph Catholic School in Petersburg, VA. I have been the principal of Saint Joseph since 2015 and I am grateful for this opportunity to share the story of SJS. Formerly a teacher at St. Pius in Norfolk and St. Bridget of Richmond, I am grateful to have been presented with this opportunity to lead SJS.

We’ll start tonight with a bit of backstory. SJS was founded in 1876 by the Daughters of Charity. The school was originally located on Market St as part of SJC. In 1916, the school moved to its current location on Franklin St. One of the key standouts of SJS is that it is the oldest Catholic School in the state of VA. This achievement has not come without challenges along the way!

The closest Catholic school is SEES, which is 30 miles north in Chesterfield. Not only is SJS the only Catholic school that is south of the James, it is the only fully accredited school in this area. Similar to other Diocesan schools, SJS is fully accredited through AdvancEd. Public schools in the area are either partially accredited with warning or are not accredited. As both the oldest Catholic school in VA and the only Catholic school in the Tri-Cities area, we all have a calling to ensure that this school is able to fulfill its mission for years to come.

Let’s start with our mission: Rooted in Catholic values, Saint Joseph Catholic School promotes scholarship, discipleship, and citizenship. At the core of what we do is our Catholic faith; it is the Catholic values we hope to instill in our students on a daily basis. In each of the three ships, as we like to call them, we aim to put our faith at the forefront so that our students are not only learning about Catholic values, but are carrying them out.

A key identifier of Saint Joseph School is that we are not just a private school, but we are a Catholic school. This is what sets us apart from other schools. It is what draws folks into our school. It is why community members support our mission. But we are not a Catholic school providing education to just Catholics. Like All Saints, we embrace diversity. We welcome the opportunity to break down the stereotype that Catholic schools are for students coming solely from wealthy families.

Over the past few years, we have seen the numbers of both Hispanic and African American students increasing. Looking at our student population more closely, 61% of our students are Catholic, with the remaining 39% are of other Christian denominations. 35% African American, 28% Hispanic, 37% Caucasian. On a daily basis, we have the opportunity to use this diversity as a means to develop a positive community culture.
Developing these positive relationships start as soon as a family walks through the front doors. It begins with a warm smile from Mrs. Peters. And it is carried throughout the day in the classrooms. We are blessed at SJS to have not only highly qualified teachers, but folks who take the time to teach the whole child. In the classrooms, our teachers actively use data to better know their students and develop lessons that are both meaningful and engaging.

Over the past few years, our instructional programs have shifted to a more student-centered approach. Using instructional practices, such as Guided Reading and Guided Math, our teachers embrace the need for differentiated instruction. Additionally, we are in the process of forming sustainable partnerships with Petersburg City Public Schools to use Title funding to implement after school tutoring and summer programs.

One area, in particular, that has seen a tremendous amount of growth is student technology. In 2015, there was a set of dated laptops and home routers in each classroom, which caused for networking nightmares. Because of the generosity of supporters and the commitment to creating a more engaging learning environment, we have a 1:1 Chromebook program in grades 3-8, iPads in lower elementary, and a SMART Board in every classroom. These tools are only as good as the users, though! The teachers at SJS have opened their arms to not just technology, but to incorporating innovative teaching practices.

As these programs are implemented, our students are continuing to succeed as they continue their educational journey. Since 2015, we have had a 100% acceptance rate of students applying to Governor’s school programs. Most recently, three of our eight 8th graders from last year are attending the Governor’s school and one is attending the specialty center at Matoaca High School. Featured here is Rashad Seaborn, who graduated from SJS in 2017. He is one of four VA HS students to win the Strong Men and Strong Women in VA History contest. His essay focused on facing diversity while achieving academic success.

In addition to promoting scholarship, SJS utilizes a Peacemaker program to support the development of Catholic virtues. At the beginning of each month, students are introduced to a virtue that becomes the focus for the coming weeks. We celebrate students who have demonstrated these values at the end of each month. This program allows for grade level buddies to explore virtues that are central tenets of the Catholic faith and what it means to live as a Peacemaker.

Outside of the classrooms, students are encouraged to be disciples of Christ in their communities. Under the guidance of Mrs. Parham, our students complete 25 hours of service, ranging from working at the Hope center, collecting items for the Little Sisters of the Poor, and volunteering at the local animal shelter. We hope to instill in our students the understanding of the power of service in their communities.

So, what comes next? What is needed to ensure that Saint Joseph School is around for the next 142 years? These questions are certainly alive in my head on a daily basis, and I would argue they’re questions that several folks here ask themselves! What can we do to ensure that the school remains
viable for years to come? For starters, it begins with sharing our story and continuing to connect with individuals who are passionate about Catholic education. There is no denying the fact that the school has needs; what Catholic school doesn’t! At the same time, SJS is rebounding from a serious dip in enrollment in the early 2000. When the school was at the point of closing, enrollment was at its lowest. Because of the hard work of many people though, we are headed in the right direction.

We currently have 127 students at the school in grades JK-8. This year, we have welcomed 40 new students and we have retained 89% of our students from the 2017-18 school year. This is both a significant and stable increase from last year in which we ended the year with 115 students. I believe that if we can continue the work that we are all doing, we will be able to see increases in enrollment in the foreseeable future. Until then, the reality is that there is a wide gap in the total number of students we have enrolled and the max capacity of the school, which is 180 students.

This gap presents a major challenge with general operations. Like All Saints, the actual cost to educate a student is around $9,000. Our tuition rate is $6,750. If every student was paying full tuition, we would still be at a deficit. On top of that gap is the increasing need of financial assistance for families who would like to send their students to a Catholic school, but are not able to afford a full tuition. This past year, we provided financial aid to 94% of our families.

Sources of aid come from support from the Diocese of Richmond and from individual donors contributing private scholarships, such as Mr. Marcus Weinstein through the Weinstein Properties Scholarship, which provides five years of tuition for African-American males. Additionally, we have been provided with an endowed scholarship through the generosity of an anonymous donor. The St. John Paul II scholarship is available for Catholic students, who are parishioners of local Catholic churches and who are actively involved in service in their community.

Most importantly, the Education Improvement Scholarships Tax Credits program (EISTC) has been a major source of financial aid for students who meet the necessary qualifications. This tax credit program has opened the door to a Catholic education for so many individuals. Without the tax credits, there is no doubt that a large number of the 94% of families receiving aid would not be able to attend SJS.

In addition to the need to raise for tuition assistance, the school campus is in need of revitalization. A tremendous amount of work is being done to recruit support for these efforts. We are making progress with campus renovations, but there is still a great deal to be done. As we look to continue to grow enrollment, as well as retain current families, we must ensure that our learning environment is comfortable not just for students, but also for teachers.

I’d like to close out this evening’s presentation with a simple thank you. Thank you for taking the time to not only learn more about SJS, but to show an interest in the impact that Catholic schools have in urban settings. Dr. Trani, I want to thank you for inviting me to be a part of this evening and for providing the opportunity to share the wonderful story of SJS. For those of you who would like visit the school, our doors are open. Our students love to greet new friends and our staff always finds a way to make you feel at home. Thank you all for your time tonight. I ask for your prayers for the students, staff, and faculty of Saint Joseph and I invite you all to join the SJS story.