

In April, the Diocese of Saginaw and Office of Catholic Schools released a statement emphasizing the importance of Catholic schools and how they remain committed to supporting them. “Today, we begin a new chapter in the history of Catholic education in the Diocese of Saginaw,” the statement read.

Bishop Robert Gruss has identified Catholic schools in the diocese as one of the top two priorities of his ministry and encouraged the establishment of a committee to lead an initiative entitled, Our Catholic Schools: Centered in Christ, Committed to Excellence, which is to be “a dedicated effort to strengthen and grow Catholic schools in the diocese.”

Not long ago, there were many more Catholic schools in the Diocese of Saginaw than there are today. The list of Catholic schools in Michigan that have closed over the past few decades is a long one. In 2019, the Detroit Free Press reported that over 200 private schools in Michigan had closed in the preceding decade alone.

This is not a new phenomenon by any means. Many people remember when the Archdiocese of Detroit announced the closure of 56 schools back in 1971.

Catholic schools in smaller communities have continued to make the difficult decision to close over the years, including the beloved Saints Peter & Paul School in Ruth and St. Mary’s School in Parisville. There have been closures as recently as last month, with Bishop Kelley Catholic School in Lapeer announcing that its doors would close after more than 70 years due to low enrollment.

With the intention of reversing this trend in the Diocese of Saginaw, a school sustainability committee began meeting in the spring of 2021, and soon identified four areas to focus on: Catholic identity and academic excellence, marketing and enrollment, financial vitality, and people and governance. Efforts in these areas are already building momentum and fostering a “spirit of renewal,” according to a statement from the diocese.

As of August, 2022, these efforts have led to the establishment of a new Diocese of Saginaw School Council as well as specific subcommittees to address each of the areas identified above. These groups will be meeting throughout the coming months.

Included on the school sustainability committee, as well as the subcommittee on financial vitality, is Michael Cavanaugh, Principal of Our Lady of Lake Huron (OLLH) School in Harbor Beach. OLLH is the last Catholic school remaining in the Upper Thumb, one of twelve schools supported by the Diocese of Saginaw.

The parish community of Our Lady of Lake Huron Catholic Church built a school for the parish in 1923. A high school was later added, adjoining the grade school in 1939, but it closed in 1970 after a total of 859 graduates had passed through its doors.

The school continues to serve students from nursery age through 8th grade and remains an integral part of the Harbor Beach community. Cavanaugh, who just finished his second year at OLLH, has great appreciation for the parish community, which has shown strong support for the school.

“One of the things that I’ve learned here is that tradition runs very deep,” he says. When he sees grandparents and great-grandparents attending the school’s Grandparents Day and other events, he sees how important OLLH School is to so many families, and the multi-generational support is one of the many drivers in his work to keep the school going strong despite challenges.

Economic pressures, like competing with public schools for rising teacher and staff salaries, as well as social pressures in an ever-evolving cultural and political world complicate the operating of a small, traditional Catholic school in the 2020s.

Concerns about the affordability of private education are common, especially amidst a struggling economy. Cavanaugh says that OLLH works diligently to keep tuition rates from ballooning and to continue offering ways to lower the cost for families, including those with multiple children.

“OLLH has what is referred to as family-based tuition,” Cavanaugh explains. “That entails families paying full tuition for the first child, at either the in-parish or out-of-parish rate, but additional children from the family only incur the student fee, which last year was \$170.”

He knows that paying tuition for education in a community with public schools is a stretch for many local families, but he also strongly believes in faith-based education and its potential for helping students develop strong moral, ethical, and spiritual values in addition to a traditional academic education.

“Primary to Christian formation and ministry is to develop a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, Cavanaugh says. “By finding and developing that relationship with Christ one finds the deeper purpose and God's plan for their life. Faith-based education assists in this process, and gives parents—and thus, the children, the students in the school—a different moral development based on attention to and practice of spiritual and religious traditions. [Students receive] different moral and ethical development because we celebrate Mass every week, we pray before meals, we pray in the morning as a community. We have kindergarteners by January reading scripture during Mass from the lectern.”

“[Students] will do readings, they do singing, and that, I think, is the difference,” he continues. “I think what it does, is it gives kids a different perspective. It gives them a different moral conscience; it touches that dimension, which is a very important dimension. And then in turn, I think what happens is by developing their spiritual and religious values there is a different moral conscience. And I think that's a choice that parents can understand.”

One of the primary facets of faith-based, Catholic education, according to Cavanaugh, is the recognition that parents are the first teachers of their children, and therefore OLLH works to partner with parents in the development of their children. They work alongside parents to help children grow academically, spiritually, and religiously.

He further believes that faith-based education lends itself to academic excellence, and to validate that assertion, he points to the significant academic achievements of many of their past students. “It's no secret—most of the valedictorians at Harbor Beach over the last few years have been students that graduated eighth grade here,” he contends. “We challenge each student to achieve their full potential.”

Another common concern among parents is how smoothly their children will transition from private school to public secondary schooling after 8th grade. Cavanaugh says that while there will always be growing pains for children moving from one stage of adolescence to the next, in general OLLH students have transitioned well to public schooling academically, with many students testing out of 9th grade math and beginning with geometry.

OLLH students also often excel athletically and musically at the secondary school level, as the school maintains a co-op arrangement for band, PE classes, and middle school sports programs with Harbor Beach Community Schools, allowing OLLH students to integrate with their future high school classmates.

Between the diocese's renewed invigoration in supports its schools and OLLH's ongoing efforts to maintain its reputation for providing high-quality education to its students, Cavanaugh believes now is as good a time as ever for parents to be considering OLLH for their children's educational needs.

As part of the Our Catholic Schools: Centered in Christ, Committed to Excellence initiative, a recent mailing containing resource information was mailed to thousands of area households outlining the benefits of attending Our Lady of Lake Huron School.

That mailing is one piece of OLLH's plan to market and support its school. The Diocese of Saginaw will be supporting additional efforts with the hiring of two new positions at the diocesan level in coming weeks. A new marketing and enrollment director as well as a new Catholic identity and curriculum director will soon be hired to continue bolstering the "spirit of renewal."

That spirit is being felt in Harbor Beach at Our Lady of Lake Huron as well. "It's a special place," Cavanaugh says of the school. In just two years there, he has received an overwhelming amount of positive feedback from former OLLH students and their parents about the impact of their experience at the school.

And while he believes that Thumb communities have strong public school systems in place, he hopes that more area families will consider OLLH as an alternative if they are looking for a faith-based education at a school with a well-established tradition of excellence.