



Pa. celebrates Catholic Schools Week

Colleen Hroncich

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I still remember celebrating Catholic Schools Week in my elementary school. We had a grandparents' breakfast, special dress-up days, an open house where we showed off special projects for our families and a school night at the roller-skating rink. It was a special time and helped us appreciate how lucky we were to attend such tight-knit, faith-based schools.

This week marks the 49th anniversary of Catholic Schools Week, and schools around the country are greeting it with similar fanfare. Having proved their worth during the pandemic, Catholic schools have good reason to celebrate.

Bishop McCort Catholic High School in Johnstown is a good example. Because it already had a flexible instruction plan in place for snow days, the school missed only one day of classes after Gov. Tom Wolf closed schools in March 2020. Bishop McCort was able to pivot to high-quality online instruction that kept its students moving forward. McCort provided in-person instruction for 84% of its regularly scheduled days during the 2020-21 school year.

Parents rewarded Bishop McCort's success by flocking to it. "Due to our commitment to students during the pandemic, parents from across the region, state, and country are still taking notice of the work we have done and continue to do," says Principal Tom Smith. "We've had 131 students transfer to Bishop McCort since March 2020."

Catholic schools throughout Pennsylvania had similar experiences. Sean McAleer, director of education for the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference, explained that every Catholic school in the state took the opportunity to plan flexible instruction days when the state introduced them for the 2019-20 school year.

It's not surprising that Catholic schools were leaders when it came to reopening during covid-19. For starters, Catholic schools tend to be mission-driven, so school leaders are likely to feel compelled to offer a safe place for the students they serve. Beyond that, Catholic schools — like other private schools — rely on tuition payments. If they don't meet their students' needs, parents won't be keen on keeping their children enrolled.

Like Bishop McCort, Catholic schools throughout Pennsylvania have experienced enrollment growth over the past few years, often after years of declines. According to McAleer, many schools were worried after the initial — and admittedly modest — covid enrollment bump that

they'd lose students for the following year. But diocesan schools in Pennsylvania saw a 2% enrollment increase in 2021-22 — double the increase of 2020-21.

“We’re proud of what we’re doing educationally in our schools,” says McAleer. “We’re also very proud of the national report card results. We actually saw increases. They might have been small, but they were still increases. So, we’re very proud of what we’re doing.”

The encouraging news about Catholic schools makes celebrating Catholic Schools Week even more exciting for leaders like Smith. “Bishop McCort is a faith-based educational option that is a beacon of positivity, hope, and light in the city and provides the children and families of the region with amazing educational options,” he says.

Colleen Hroncich is a policy analyst at the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom.