

Final Mass: When a Catholic school runs out of money

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This is the end for St. James of the Valley School in Wyoming. Financial problems mounted too high, offering plate donations too little. On Thursday, the school has its final Mass before shutting its doors for good.

For Mother Teresa Catholic Elementary School in Liberty Township, though, enrollment is booming. The school broke ground on a new \$3 million addition on Sunday, adding an extra classroom per grade to accommodate the influx. Mother Teresa opened in 1998 with 20 students in a church basement. Today, there are 460 students.

The dichotomy illustrates the plight of Catholic schools nationwide. While some are exploding, turning away hopeful applicants, others are dwindling to nothing. In the early 1960s, there were more than 5.2 million students in nearly 13,000 Catholic schools in the U.S., according to the National Catholic Educational Association. Today, that number is down to 1.9 million.

St. James Principal Jim Haag declined to be interviewed for this article, saying the subject is too difficult to discuss. He issued a statement about the closure, though, saying that while it is sad, he understands the economic necessity.

"We are choosing to celebrate the complete history of the school, rather than mourn its closure," he wrote. "... We honor the past pastors, staff, alumni, students and families who have made St. James of the Valley so special over the years, and we thank them for being part of the St. James of the Valley family."

'Lighting the Way' report: The future of Catholic education

The Archdiocese of Cincinnati won't provide school-by-school data, but overall enrollment at Greater Cincinnati Catholic schools is down 19.5 percent from the 1996-97 year, from 39,450 students to 31,750.

In the past decade, the archdiocese has closed or consolidated 20 schools. St James is the most recent. Prior to that it was Prince of Peace School in Madisonville, which closed after the 2013-14 school year. St. Peter Claver Latin School For Boys, which closed this past week, was a recognized Catholic school but was not owned by the Cincinnati archdiocese.

Across the river, the Diocese of Covington declined to provide even general figures, saying enrollment stats are used for internal purposes. A spokesman said the Covington Diocese has not consolidated or closed any schools in the past decade.

In 2012, the Archdiocese of Cincinnati released a two-year study on the future of Catholic education. The report, called "Lighting the Way," highlighted a few concerns for the region, including declining enrollment; uneven distribution – some schools have waiting lists while others are underutilized; and a tough economy, making it more and more difficult for parents to afford tuition.

Study respondents of all backgrounds, Catholic or otherwise, listed tuition as the No. 1 reason for not enrolling in a Catholic school. The average tuition for an elementary student in the archdiocese is about \$3,600 a year, said Superintendent Jim Rigg. For a high school student, it's about \$9,000 to \$9,500.

St. James of the Valley: The road to closure

Parents knew SJOV was in trouble in early January. The new parish pastor and finance manager discovered the school had a deficit of \$256,000 from the previous year. They initiated a review of operations to determine if staying open would be possible.

In March, Principal Haag confirmed the worst: "The consensus of the recommendations was that St. James of the Valley School will need to close in order for the parish of St. James of the Valley to have a chance to survive," he wrote in a letter to parents. SJOV apparently had been operating in a deficit for a dozen years, according to previous Enquirer reports, with the practice simply being to draw funds from parish reserves at the Archdiocese to make up the difference.

SJOV had 145 students at the end. Closing is an absolute last resort, but there was no other viable option, Rigg said. Enrollment is not the end-all-be-all, but schools need money to operate, and enrollment is the main driver of revenue.

When the diocese released the "Lighting the Way" study, it was like putting a stake in the ground, Rigg said. It was the diocese saying, We believe in Catholic education, this is what is threatening us, and this is how we'll survive.

Sometimes, though, for some schools, there's no way out.

"We close schools, ultimately, because they're out of money," Rigg said. "We examined every manner of restoring that school. ... We believe in Catholic education, and when we close a school, something dies."

But Marcy Bok is not convinced. Bok had two kids at St. James, one in kindergarten and one in second grade, and she was the PTA treasurer. In a letter she wrote shortly after the closure was announced, Bok lamented that more wasn't done earlier to save the school. SJOV was in a free fall for a decade, she said, but parents didn't find out until January – until, really, it was too late to do anything.

The school was financially mismanaged for years, the record-keeping was abysmal, and there was "no oversight or checks/balances put into place by the ultimate stakeholders – the Archdiocese of Cincinnati – as far as we can tell," Bok wrote.

"I feel that it is wrong to not let people know there are two sides to this story and the other side reveals a much deeper, broken Catholic System. I am a lifelong Catholic myself and chose a Catholic school for my own children because I believe in what that education stands for in their lives. But this experience has shaken my faith and the faith of so many people around me."

Bok is proud to have been part of St. James and feels blessed for the three years she had with the school. But from a business standpoint, it wasn't well run, she said. And, SJOV's is not a unique story.

"It happens all the time; we're just a cautionary tale," Bok said. "But why do we have to be a cautionary tale? Why does this keep continuing to happen? And I think that is way bigger than St. James of the Valley closing."

Building healthy schools

The Archdiocese of Cincinnati covers a 19-county region, stretching north past Dayton. Of the 20 closures/consolidations in the past decade, though, 14 are inside the Interstate 275 loop.

By contrast, some of the schools in Cincinnati's suburban areas – where there is a boom of business growth and population – are filled to capacity.

Rigg looks at two areas when evaluating whether a school is healthy: Is there strong leadership, starting with the principal and extending out? And does the school know its mission? The overall goal is to educate students and pass down the Catholic faith, but each school needs a specific identity as well, Rigg said. For some struggling schools, the problem is they're trying to serve a neighborhood that existed 50 years ago



Top, Fourth graders make their way through the hallway at Mother Teresa Catholic Elementary School. The school has a few days of classes left for the current school year before summer break and will be breaking ground soon to add more classrooms onto their school building (photo: *The Enquirer*/Amanda Rossmann). Second, An overwhelming financial deficit has forced the closing of the school at St. James of the Valley in Wyoming (photo: Kelly McBride/*The Community Press*). Third, Ethan Vanderwater, a kindergartner at Mother Teresa Catholic Elementary School, works on an assignment during class. Bottom, Kindergarten teacher Ellen Couch helps Alex Peyton with an art project during class at Mother Teresa Catholic Elementary School (photos: *The Enquirer*/Amanda Rossmann).

rather than the population that lives there now.

"It doesn't mean we compromise our academic quality. It doesn't mean we compromise our Catholic identity. But all families of all backgrounds deserve a quality education, and our schools need to be poised to serve them," Rigg said. "Do they know that? Do they know who they're supposed to be serving?"

And enrollment, while important, is more a side effect than a cause of health, Rigg said.

"Leadership and mission beget quality," he said. "They beget enrollment growth."

Mother Teresa: A school on the rise

The mood is bright at Mother Teresa Catholic Elementary. That could be because the school year is almost complete, or it could be because, frankly, the school is doing well. The elementary has to turn away students each year, said Sister Anne Schulz, principal. When the new addition is finished and the school can serve up to 657 students, she thinks it will still be full.

The playground is busy, with students in light blue and white polo shirts playing kickball, foursquare and swinging. In a kindergarten classroom, students dance and make paint hand prints on a class poster. Outside, the lines for the new addition – the school's fourth – are clearly etched into the grass by a mower.

It's a combination of a good school in the right spot, Sister Schulz said. The curriculum is difficult, so Mother Teresa students are well-prepared for high school. And, the school is one of few Catholic options in the area.

"If you ask a parent what they like, they just say the atmosphere," Sr. Anne said. "It's a fun place to be. That's what keeps you going."

The school was founded shortly after its name-sake died. Parents voted for the name because they wanted their children to embody the qualities of Mother Teresa: awareness of others, respect, a deep relationship with God. Society is pulling families and children away from God, and part of the role of Catholic schools is to instill in children a strong, lasting faith, Sister Schulz said.

"To me, that's why we exist," she said.

An optimist's dream: Enrollment uptick

When Rigg started at the archdiocese in 2010, enrollment was dropping by more than 1,000 students a year. Now, the losses are a couple hundred a year. In two or three years, Rigg predicts an enrollment gain. He's a self-described optimist, so that may play a part in his outlook, but if the diocese follows the plan laid out in "Lighting the Way," Rigg believes it will be successful.

In the 2012-13 year, the Cincinnati archdiocese had 5.08 percent of all available students in its market. That accounts for the entire 19-county area, looking at the overall population of students within a 3-mile radius of an archdiocese school. That number is slowly ticking up, to 5.16 percent this year.

Honing in on the area overlapped by Cincinnati Public Schools, Catholic schools account for about 23 percent of students, according to data from another recent study. And it's important to note public schools have waning enrollment as well. CPS dropped from more than 48,000 students in 1995 to about 30,000 today. CPS' number has already started to climb again, though, with increases the past couple years.

Rigg looks at two areas when evaluating whether a school is healthy: Is there strong leadership, starting with the principal and extending out? And does the school know its mission? The overall goal is to educate students and pass down the Catholic faith, but each school needs a specific identity as well, Rigg said. For some struggling schools, the problem is they're trying to serve a neighborhood that existed 50 years ago

"I support public education, but for a variety of reasons, many parents are drawn to Catholic schools," he said. "Our schools have a centuries-old tradition, going back to the early centuries in Europe, of providing a superior education. Of giving children the knowledge, the skills they need to be successful."