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New Jersey's neediest students need new focus after COVID-19 report

3-minute read

Barbara Stevens Special to the USA TODAY Network

Published 4:36 a.m. ET March 22, 2024 | Updated 4:37 a.m. ET March 22, 2024

The New Jersey COVID-19 Response Report has illuminated the enduring challenges faced by those already on the margins, emphasizing the critical need for comprehensive support systems. In times of crisis and in times of reflection, it is paramount that we reaffirm our commitment to serving those in greatest need and ensuring equitable access to quality educational resources.

The statistics from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, known as the Nation's Report Card, affirm the impact of Catholic education, particularly among low-income and minority students. When our Catholic schools returned to in-person instruction before other institutions, we saw growth, which we continue to see today, while the overall educational system saw a decline.

These findings, given in two reports, underscore the pivotal role our Catholic schools continue to play in breaking the cycle of poverty and empowering individuals to realize their fullest potential. For many generations, our Catholic schools have produced a strong record of assisting people to succeed in life and in many instances, have helped to break the cycle of poverty that poor educational results cause.

Emerging out of the pandemic, Catholic education in Central and Western New Jersey has continued to demonstrate its unwavering dedication to serving our youth. Our winter testing will show just that; in general, all schools showed growth, and we are positioned to show overall growth by the end of the year. Through our innovative outreach initiatives, including mental health resources, our schools remain a lifeline of hope and opportunity for vulnerable communities.

Our children need the care that flows from educators who are marked as people of hope and love. Our more than 7,100 students in our 26 schools within the four counties of the Diocese of

Metuchen — Middlesex, Hunterdon, Somerset and Warren — show that families who choose faith-based education not only have their children excel in academics but also in the communities around them.

We focus not just on forming the child but on forming virtuous citizens for our country. While some may accept the lag of educational issues at face value, our educators, administrators, parish communities and benefactors that support them show what happens when we go above and beyond the standard current and reach out of ourselves to serve all in need. When we focus on educating the whole human person no matter where they call home, especially students who need extra attention, care, and love, we find our heroes of tomorrow, ready for whatever the world throws at them — and our statistics prove it.

While some aspects of our schools' success was shown in this study, our schools offer so much more, too. Our Catholic schools are deeply rooted in the values of compassion and service and embody the commitment of our shared history of uplifting marginalized and underserved communities. In all four counties in which we serve, our schools stand as beacons of hope, providing a nurturing environment where every student, regardless of background in faith, ethnicity and economic status, is embraced with dignity and respect, propelling them to be the servant leaders of tomorrow. You are most welcome to check out our schools for your children, too.

Barbara Stevens is the superintendent of schools for the Diocese of Metuchen. Located in Middlesex, Somerset, Hunterdon and Warren counties, Catholic schools in the Diocese of Metuchen are open to students of all faiths and backgrounds and are nationally accredited.