

In light of Catholic School's Week, we were asked to share with all of you why we made the choice to move our children to St. Vincent de Paul and then subsequently Peoria Notre Dame and why we feel that it is one of the best choices we have made.

We have been blessed with four children and opportunities to live in multiple countries and US cities prior to returning to Peoria in 2010. Thus, we have experienced some outstanding, highly ranked schools. Upon arriving back in Peoria seven years ago, we decided to buy a house in an excellent public school district. We were happy with the teachers and quality of education. However, at the end of the first year, our oldest child wanted to explore a Catholic option. She had met several children from St. Vincent de Paul over the summer and felt that these children exhibited really strong character: loyalty to each other, deep concern for others, a strong faith in God, and noticeably strong moral framework that weaved its way into their conduct and choices. Needless to say, she was intrigued, determined to explore Catholic options, and strong minded about her ultimate decision to switch schools.

We enrolled her at SVdP that fall. She thrived and loved it. A year later, we decided to move our other three children to SVdP.

The obvious and most important benefit of Catholic schools is spirituality. Our children's' souls were being fed daily with prayer in the classroom providing them a deeper understanding of their faith. They were also receiving grace more frequently through the sacraments. The step change we quickly noticed in their faith was obvious. Our children were building deeper faith that was helping them to live out their true calling to love and serve Jesus. As a result of their transition, our faith strengthened as well. Looking back now, we realize the hand of God in all of this.

In addition to strong spirituality, another huge blessing that the choice for Catholic schools has bestowed upon us is the extremely strong sense of community. The close bond with the other families in the school is something that you just don't get by attending the parish for Sunday mass only. Most of the families we consider our closest friends today are SVdP families. The SVdP community has really become our extended family. This blessing is evident almost daily. We believe the strong family bonds significantly reduces drama and bullying amongst the children, which is a big problem in so many schools. Much more importantly, it provides you the most amazing support network imaginable when life throws you a curve ball. The support our family received from our parish family when one of our children was diagnosed with a very significant illness was astonishing. This included nonstop prayers, countless visits and check-ins, emotional support, meals, etc. I cannot imagine having gone through such a difficult time without the support we received from our SVdP family. Our stronger faith and amazing support from the SVdP community made an enormous difference in a very difficult time. At times, we talk about whether it made all the difference.

A few additional strengths of a Catholic school education are the academics, the loving faculty and the opportunity to volunteer. Academically, we have loved Catholic schools. The curriculum has been exceptional. The teachers have not only been excellent, but loving and caring at the same time. This was never more evident than when our child was very ill. We felt the love. Both of us have had a great and rewarding opportunity to get involved in coaching and leading a student organization.

The gifts of the Catholic schools are the ones that speak to the soul and the heart. Our children are blessed with friends, other parents, and teachers that speak to the hardest questions in life. How do we give our lives purpose? How do we serve our Creator? How do we cultivate a thankful heart for all of our blessings? How do we handle hardship that will undoubtedly hit us along life's journey?

We have had one child graduate from Peoria Notre Dame. She had her choice of colleges from being well prepared at her grade school and high school. She will tell you that she loved her educational experience. The children she met that led her to Catholic schools are still her friends today. During her time at SVdP and PND, she developed a strong desire for helping others through mission trips and involvement in her local community. She developed a longing for the sacraments, adoration and church teaching. She found answers to life's hardest questions and knows that a personal relationship with Jesus Christ will guide her in her life's journey.

When we count our blessings, we recognize the beautiful gift of Catholic schools which points to the biggest gift of life, faith in Jesus Christ.

Matt and Nicole Jones