

Fulfilling Our Responsibility as Catholic Educators

By Mike England, President of St. Mary's South Side Catholic High School

Several years ago, I had an experience that still sits with me today. I was in charge of admissions at another Catholic high school in St. Louis, and I made a decision that reflected naivety and a closed mind.

I was approached by a mom who had a son with significant learning needs, and she wanted him to attend our school. She brought him to my office, and I interviewed him. I could see he needed a lot of extra assistance, and felt there was no way he could keep up with our curriculum or participate in all we had to offer. When the mom came in after the interview, I had to break the news. Her son would not be admitted. That's when she delivered a truth bomb that completely changed my perspective.

She reminded me that the church promotes being pro-life; that all life is valuable. She had this child and was doing everything she could for him, including wanting a Catholic education. And yet, we wouldn't accept him.

She was right, we were wrong.



Then Chris Armitage and his parents arrived on my doorstep at St. Mary's. Like God was showing His mercy for that incident all those years ago and was giving me a second chance. I took it.

Upon meeting with my team to confirm that all necessary accommodations were in place to support Chris's learning needs, we admitted him. I don't know who was happier, the Armitage family or me! Chris, who had been turned away at other schools, like the young man I turned away, had found a home at St. Mary's.

This experience with Chris really opened my eyes to what Catholic education needs to be.

It's no secret that our Catholic high schools in St. Louis are super competitive. We're focused on robust academics, competitive athletics, a variety of activities and clubs, fundraising for facilities and programs – anything that will make us stand out for enrollment and donor support. Competition is good! It's what keeps our Catholic schools vibrant and well-funded to continue our St. Louis tradition of having multiple options for parents seeking a Catholic education for their child.

YET, it can often take our eyes off the ultimate prize as Catholic educators; *to bring Christ into the lives of all young people*. Yes, we offer theology classes, require Christian service, celebrate mass and the Sacraments. But what else are we doing to create well-rounded empathetic grads who aren't just focused on achievement?

The depth of our work must focus on building a Christian community by lifting each other up.

Chris's daily presence and the reaction of his neurotypical peers is what this looks like. In his second year at St. Mary's, we see how Chris has opened up to others, and how his peers embrace him through the lens of acceptance and love. He is "one of the guys" and he has made our school better. The atmosphere is no longer just about learning and participation, it's about forming young men with a heart for others.

Now some may say, “Well, St. Mary’s is set up for that.” And yes, it’s true. We have a very talented team of learning consultants who help some of our other young men who need assistance. But it doesn’t mean that our other Catholic schools can’t make some adjustments to broaden their perspective of an authentic Catholic education. Given that the only major concern when considering a student with disabilities is the level of support and the cost, it’s important to remember you have options. One Classroom will walk you through it, train your staff, and provide grant dollars to help with funding.

You have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

I also think you’ll be surprised at how your community reacts. Not just your students, but faculty, parents, alumni, donors; everyone. All it takes is an open mind and an open heart. At the very least, be willing to give the student with disabilities and their family an opportunity to explore the potential for an education at your high school.

You don’t need extra classrooms, and you don’t need to change your school’s identity. Keep focusing on those aspects that make your high school unique, while adding an extra dimension of Christ-centered excellence with inclusion. NOW is the time to create a place of belonging for our Catholic students with disabilities who want to attend our high schools.

When everyone is on board, success is the only outcome!

If you’d like to visit about it, don’t hesitate to reach out to me at englandm@stmaryshs.com.