

Reflections

by the
Most Reverend Thomas J. Murphy



Is There Any Value in Catholic Education?

The title of this column might be jarring to some. Yet, the question gets to the heart of an important issue in the life of the Church today. The question needs to be asked in light of the tremendous resources being used by the Church today to maintain Catholic Schools.

The law of the Church is very clear. A parish has the responsibility to offer education and formation to all its members. It is not allowed to use its resources for the benefit of some to the detriment of others. Moreover, since parents have the primary obligation for the religious education and formation of their children, parents have a right to choose which school their sons and daughters attend.

In seventeen parish communities of Eastern Montana, parents are fortunate enough to have a choice regarding the education of their children. In these parish communities, there exists the rich resource of a Catholic school. To maintain and operate a Catholic school today involves sacrifice, dedication and commitment on the part of parents, teachers and the parish community. Catholic schools today face clear challenges of escalating finances, teacher recruitment, and need for greater enrollment.

We celebrate "Catholic Schools Week" at this time in Eastern Montana. The 1985 theme of Catholic Schools Week is "Sharing the Vision: Teaching Values." In many ways this theme captures the response to the question posed as the title of this column. If a Catholic school shares a vision and teaches values, then Catholic education offers the community an incredible gift and it should be and must be preserved.

Yet the question arises of how to share a vision and teach values when their mission and purpose are part and parcel of the mission of a parish community which recognizes its responsibility for the education/formation of all. A Catholic school which drains the resources of a parish or becomes a divisive force among people contradicts its very nature of sharing a vision and teaching values.

Essential to the success of any Catholic school is the witness and commitment of parents and teachers to Catholic ideals and values. Parents of students in Catholic schools take on an even greater obligation because they must witness in word and deed to what is shared in a classroom. Teachers in Catholic schools are not only expected to be competent instructors, but models and examples of the Catholic faith.

Success stories of Catholic education throughout our country where schools have long waiting lists of potential students share one common theme: they dare to be Catholic. Schools which compromise the vision and value of Catholic education will not survive for they do not maintain the integrity essential for Catholic education.

Catholic education must also be realistic. Such realism forces schools to examine tuition costs and teacher salaries as well as the support of parents of the parish which subsidizes school costs. Realism forces schools to ask the question if they should continue to exist when class size becomes so small that one cannot justify the resources expended. Hopefully, in such instances, every effort should be made to encourage parents to utilize the gift of Catholic education.

Continued on next page

Is There Any Value in Catholic Education?

In general, do parents of students get a satisfactory return on the investment in a Catholic education? The answer is a definite "YES" when Catholic schools share a vision and teach values, when the school community is rooted in the Eucharist, when parents and teachers witness to students not only by what they teach in a classroom but by what they live in their daily lives, when Catholic schools are seen and appreciated as part of the total mission of education/formation to all, when parents and countless others are willing to continue to sacrifice in order to offer their children "something more" which is possible in Catholic schools, and most of all when a school dares to be "Catholic."

I believe I benefitted from 24 years of Catholic education described above. It happened in the past. It can and does happen today!