



# Case Studies

The Renewal of Catholic Education  
in ICLE-Supported Schools



# Introduction

As Catholic leaders combat the causes of plummeting enrollment in our treasured parochial system, they might look beyond the obvious financial barriers and examine curricula and culture. Fewer parents are willing or able to make costly tuition payments when the instructional differences between free government education and the local Catholic school are negligible. However, a rapidly growing movement in Catholic education demonstrates that the solution has been hiding in plain sight all along.

The evidence is increasingly clear that imitating the latest public school trend is like trying to keep up with the Joneses. It is always misguided. But when Catholic schools reject the dictates of the secular model and reclaim the Church's own distinctive tradition of education, they flourish. The Catholic intellectual tradition produced some of the keenest minds and the holiest saints in the history of the world, but educators have been cut off from that proven tradition. All teacher training and instructional models in recent decades have been fundamentally secular; they ignore, and effectively deny, transcendent Truth. Regrettably, when this fragmented, industrialized approach is imported uncritically into Catholic schools, it undermines both the faith and reason of our children—contrary to the Church's central purpose in education.

The Institute for Catholic Liberal Education (ICLE) is privileged to serve a growing wave of schools that are changing the narrative across the country. A striking renewal is now taking hold as Catholic educators rediscover the Church's tradition in the classical liberal arts and sciences. They are transforming their schools with a life-giving vision that offers relief from the factory model, which is failing the nation's youth.

In all settings—urban and rural, affluent and low-income, "high-achieving" and otherwise—the model works because it is catholic, with both a large and a small "c." It is *universal* because it is rooted in our human nature and in the nature of the world God made. Formation that fully embraces a truly Catholic vision of reality restores what has been stripped from the contemporary model: an understanding of the meaning and the purpose of things. Catholics and even non-Catholics are drawn in because they see an immediate change in their children: joy in learning.

The success of this renewal is evident not just in surging enrollment, but in the vibrant communities of faith and learning that result when "Catholic identity" is not just *added on*, but is instead *woven through* the school culture, curriculum, and pedagogy. These schools are emerging as engines of evangelization in the Church by integrating faith, culture, and life.

## SECULAR EDUCATION

Ordered toward material, temporal ends

- fragmented, industrialized
- focus on practical skills
- emphasis on information
- ignores the moral imagination
- one mile wide, one inch deep
- lectures + testing = passive learning
- susceptible to indoctrination

## CATHOLIC CLASSICAL LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

Ordered toward eternal happiness

- integration of subjects, knowledge, faith
- restores meaning and purpose
- awakens wonder
- nurtures the moral imagination
- cultivates habits of rigorous thinking
- constant discussion = active learning
- develops intellectual freedom

# Introduction

The mission of the Institute for Catholic Liberal Education is to promote the renewal of authentic Catholic education and to equip educators to bring it to life in their classrooms. Catholic *liberal* education (from the Latin, *liber*, which means free) is ordered to *the Truth that sets us free*. The Church embraced and developed the classical tradition of liberal learning and ordered it toward Jesus Christ, the Logos. The liberal arts are highly ordered tools of thinking that free us to see the truth of things, both visible and invisible. In this way, they are superior to the framework of state standards, which carve knowledge, facts, and skills into a mechanical system that obscures meaning. The Institute helps educators realize the full implications of a philosophy of education that puts Christ at its center. We focus on how this affects *what* we teach and *how* we teach in order to restore the unity of faith and reason.

To this end, ICLE offers conferences, workshops, site visits, teacher training, publications, and consultation services designed to give current and future teachers and school leaders both theory and practice for immediate use. We work with entire dioceses, as well as parish schools, independent schools, and individual teachers. Our efforts have fostered a community of inspired, faith-filled educators whose reach is exponential. The Institute has accomplished this work over the past dozen years through the mostly pro-bono work of a just a few staff members, all passionate educators who are committed to serving the Church in this way. Demand is now skyrocketing as schools pursue an approach that immerses students in all that is good and true and beautiful.

In every place where Catholic educators are given the freedom and encouragement to embrace their own tradition wholeheartedly, it is succeeding by a variety of measures. The following profiles—all schools we have been honored to serve—tell the hopeful story.

*The programs that the Institute has developed over the past dozen years provide Catholic educators with three essential things that help them realize the full implications of a philosophy of education that puts Jesus Christ, the Logos, at its center:*

- *A life-giving vision of education based on the Catholic intellectual tradition, which formed many of the keenest minds and holiest saints in history*
- *The tools of thinking and learning that allow teachers to embody the Church's vision immediately, regardless of their previous experience (or lack thereof) with liberal arts education*
- *The confidence and clarity that come from connecting with those who have already transformed their schools*



# St. Jerome Academy

PK-8 Parish School | Hyattsville, MD

St. Jerome Academy broke new ground as the first parish school within a diocesan framework to embrace the Catholic classical liberal arts and sciences. Until then, the renewal was spreading in independent schools and home schools over the course of roughly two decades. The St. Jerome experience, however, was a turning point because it: 1) demonstrated that this approach can flourish in diocesan/parish schools with varied populations, and 2) developed a coherent and beautiful educational plan that has served as a roadmap for other schools.

In 2009, St. Jerome's parish school in the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., faced dwindling enrollment and crushing debt that forced a diocesan evaluation of viability. A group of parishioners approached Pastor James M. Stack with the idea of a Catholic classical liberal arts curriculum, a bold move for an urban, socioeconomically and ethnically diverse school. Fr. Stack and then-Principal Mary Pat Donoghue embraced the idea, and a volunteer curriculum team of educators, theologians, and philosophers hammered out a 120-page educational plan for the PK-8 school. The superintendent supported the initiative, and St. Jerome's has gained national attention for its dramatic success. After the first year with the new approach, math and reading scores jumped and have continued to climb. But the fruits went well beyond mere test scores. Disproving the notion that a classical curriculum is elitist, many students who previously struggled found motivation and success through the rich content and lively discussions that required them to think deeply. Faith formation became integrated and vibrant across the curriculum.

"We have seen what it looks like for a child to be truly educated, and it is a very different thing than just the acquisition of skills," said Donoghue after just one year of the new approach. "This is about opening the treasure trove of the Catholic Church, and re-imagining ourselves in its heritage and thought."

Donoghue's pioneering experience as the leader of the first diocesan school in the country to transition to the Catholic liberal arts later served a growing national movement. She spent two years as the Director of School Services for the Institute for Catholic Liberal Education, traversing the country to assist a swelling number of schools seeking the same path to renewal. Donoghue now serves as the Executive Director of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat of Education.

Under her successor at St. Jerome Academy, Danny Flynn, the school continues to thrive. The debt that had reached nearly seven figures was eliminated by Fall 2017 due to rising enrollment, a restructuring of the tuition model, pastoral management, and debt forgiveness. The school has finished in the black for the past two years. Consistent waiting lists led to the decision to return to a two-track model, adding one grade each year. Parent enthusiasm has spawned a new high school, St. Jerome Institute, launching in Fall 2019.

## Transition Impact: Enrollment Growth

- 2010-2011: 264
- 2011-2012: 267
- 2012-2013: 269
- 2013-2014: 280
- 2014-2015: 296
- 2015-2016: 328
- 2016-2017: 330
- 2017-2018: 332
- 2018-2019: 365



# Our Lady of Lourdes

## PK-8 Parish School | Denver, CO

By the end of the 2010–2011 school year, Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic School had dropped to an enrollment of 90 students and was slated for closure by the Archdiocese. Thanks to the support of then-Auxiliary Bishop James Conley, Lourdes was given one year to attempt a transition to the Catholic classical liberal arts approach. At this point, Rosemary Vander Weele had spent seven years as a Catholic school teacher and was frustrated by what she felt was an overreliance on a secular progressive model of education in Catholic schools. Inspired to attempt something new that was rooted in a Catholic philosophy of education, Vander Weele was named principal. At the start of the 2012 school year, enrollment had increased by 40 percent. In 2018, Lourdes opened a second campus due to overwhelming demand. In the midst of this success, the Archdiocese adopted the same approach at Frassati Catholic Academy, a brand new school that opened in the fall of 2017. Additionally, demand from Lourdes families fueled the creation of an optional, Catholic liberal arts track at the local Archdiocesan high school, Bishop Machebeuf. Enrollment in the program doubled in its second year.

### Transition Impact: Enrollment Growth

- 2011–2012: 90
- 2012–2013: 128
- 2013–2014: 162
- 2014–2015: 163
- 2015–2016: 176
- 2016–2017: 202
- 2017–2018: 224
- 2018–2019: 262

When Lourdes began its transition, the budget was in the red. The parish was keeping the school afloat and the low enrollment was hurting tuition income. As Catholic identity became woven through the life of the school and its educational program rebranded, enrollment grew immediately. Lourdes also attracted large foundations interested in supporting a Catholic school that was growing and had a clear mission and vision. The transition to a liberal arts approach required very little funding; approximately \$10,000 was spent on new grammar books the first year and, more importantly, on staff training. The materials needed in the first few years were minimal; the staff simply made many trips to the library. As Vander Weele explains, the key factor was formation of the faculty in the philosophy and practice of authentic Catholic education. Consequently, that is where the school spent the bulk of its money and energy.



As a part of the Archdiocese of Denver, Lourdes is accredited through AdvancEd Accreditation and Vander Weele explains that it has not caused any major issues. She tends not to hire teaching candidates with degrees in education. Rather, she interviews in order to discern the strength of a candidate's faith and philosophy of Catholic education. Typically, her hires are drawn to this vision and tend to stay for years. While Lourdes' curriculum covers what the Archdiocese of Denver has created as standards, the students do not simply learn for the test, nor do teachers teach that way.

*ICLE has helped me as a leader and has given me confidence in knowing that I am not the only one who has felt this call from Christ. I have attended almost every summer conference, I have brought teachers with me, and have shared recordings of the talks with the entire staff. In the beginning, I also tremendously benefited from my relationships with fellow educators in the ICLE network and relied on their guidance as I faced the day-to-day decisions of the transition. If ICLE had not been here I am not sure I would have had the courage to take on this project. This is not something that can be done in a vacuum, we need to learn from and lean on each other for support, prayers, and networking. ICLE has helped me understand that the mission at Lourdes is part of something far bigger.*

Rosemary Vander Weele, Principal

Most importantly, Vander Weele observes that Lourdes' students and faculty truly love their faith. “We do not see living the faith as something we have to do, rather we see it as something we get to do. The students love going to daily Mass because it confirms what they are learning in the classroom about the Eucharist.” This hunger for transcendent Truth also is reflected in the entire community's love of learning. Teachers set the tone as powerful witnesses in both the spiritual and intellectual life.



# St. Agatha Academy

PK-8 Parish School | Winchester, KY

Pastor Frank Brawner is quick to explain that his parish school was not suffering from an enrollment crisis when it decided to transition to a Catholic liberal arts approach. “It was due to the inescapable fact that, when we look at what a Catholic school should be according to the magisterial teachings concerning education, the classical liberal arts model more perfectly reflects what the Church means by education when she utilizes that word,” he said.

Fr. Brawner reports that students are following the lead of their teachers in both excitement and engagement. He is proud that St. Agatha Academy teachers have shown a marked increase in their efforts to grow and to learn together, seeking professional development out of desire rather than obligation. They have *added* faculty meetings to discuss readings and ideas. The pastor notes that teachers seek to attend ICLE programs, each time “coming away with a renewed heart and a desire to share what they learned.”

Most importantly, teachers are seeking new ways to bring the Catholic faith alive each year. Fr. Brawner said that the most beautiful changes have been in faith formation, as St. Agatha Academy has added weekly adoration, daily rosary, beautiful artwork to bring the faith alive visually, and classes in virtue and drama. Discussions are underway about adding more opportunities for Mass each week, daily morning prayer for faculty and staff, and possibly evening prayer after school.

Enrollment has been steady at just under 150 since the transition in 2013, but in the local context this is a victory. All of the Catholic schools in neighboring counties have suffered losses of more than 30 students, and in some cases 60 students. Only St. Agatha Academy has shown no loss and modest growth, which is remarkable given that *nearly 75 percent of the student body is non-Catholic*. Administrators have noted that “the more Catholic we become, the more attractive we are to Catholic and non-Catholic students alike.” Nothing in the surrounding county or city provides an advantage compared to neighboring parochial schools. In many ways the other schools are monetarily and culturally advantaged, having universities and other commercial and capital benefits that St. Agatha’s area lacks. Yet, according to the pastor, the school is healthy and its finances have never been better.



*Our steps are slow and tentative but gain momentum and confidence as we witness the truth, beauty, and goodness of the Catholic classical liberal arts curriculum in action.*

Fr. Frank Brawner  
Pastor

Students have consistently tested very well, both before and after the transition to liberal arts education. Though the school does not teach to standardized tests, the new approach has in no way lessened results, which Fr. Brawner said was initially a point of concern. “There is a great comfort knowing that even as we pivot in our perspective, our testing scores do not reflect a drop,” he added. “And, as the object or end of our educational endeavors alters radically, we are aware that standardized tests may not reveal the full scope of our students’ development.”

Fr. Brawner said that diocesan and state regulations complicate the process of implementing a Catholic liberal arts curriculum, but the obstacles are not insurmountable. “Our obvious success in enrollment and personal development does much to quiet most critics,” he said, adding that “a strong plan and patience” make a transition possible even within the confines of a diocesan system.

The pastor said he looks to the Institute for support, training, direction in hiring, curriculum and professional development, and encouragement. His school leaders and faculty have attended almost every ICLE program offering, and now sometimes serve as presenters. “Without ICLE the process would be much more laborious, possibly jeopardizing our chances of success,” Fr. Brawner said. “ICLE provides a touchpoint for gathering resources and the contacts needed in order to make the transition without reinventing the wheel.”



# Saint Mary's High School

Diocesan High School | Phoenix, AZ

A central part of the mission of Saint Mary's High School is to provide an authentic Catholic education to all students and families who want it and are willing to work hard. The school relies heavily on financial aid. Saint Mary's accepts many students that other private Catholic schools nearby would not accept due to academic and/or financial reasons.

The transition to a Catholic liberal arts approach slowly demonstrated to many around Phoenix that Saint Mary's not only has a unique curriculum, but now has a more rigorous academic program. The change attracted more families able to pay tuition and has moved the student population from 80% to 50% eligible for free or reduced lunch. Alumni and donors have also supported the transition. In 2017 Saint Mary's celebrated its 100th year; the Centennial Gala raised about \$500,000.

As Saint Mary's intentionally cultivated a more vibrant relationship between faith and learning, SAT scores and other benchmarks have seen a strong upward trend. Students have performed dramatically better on the English portions of the SAT and now are showing steady gains in math. The class of 2019 is the first class to follow the *Seat of Wisdom* liberal arts track for all four years of high school. *Seat of Wisdom* is an integrated studies class that combines Social Studies and English into a two-period seminar. In the classes of 2016, 2017, and 2018, only honors students followed the rigorous program. However, faculty teaching non-honors sections began to transition to a seminar style and assign more classical texts. In addition, math performance jumped due to a stronger emphasis on proof, a more tightly defined curriculum, and the use of Socratic questioning in those classes.



Saint Mary's High School "roughly follows" the Diocese of Phoenix educational standards. The school says it defines its curriculum in a way that gives teachers a required scope and sequence that adequately approximates the diocesan curriculum.

Hiring has become keenly mission-oriented. The high school seeks those who understand the liberal arts and who desire to teach them within a Catholic framework. Catholic identity is paramount in hiring and creating curriculum. School leaders say they want teachers who are intellectual, but who want to minister to students by forming appropriate relationships that foster a collaborative learning environment. Teachers are not required to have standard certification when hired. All must have at least a substitute certificate and the administration supports them to obtain either a Subject Matter Expert Certificate or a standard teaching certificate.

Principal Kevin Muir said ICLE's role in the transition has been significant in two ways. First, numerous professional development opportunities including national and regional conferences, academic retreats, and on-site workshops have boosted faculty understanding and practice. Second, ICLE membership has paved the way for a network of educators who routinely share ideas. Muir said the communication has been extremely helpful in moving from the theoretical to the practical.

"Making a transition to a liberal arts curriculum and rewriting our mission statement allowed us the opportunity to awaken all members of the school to our mission," Muir said. "The awareness of this mission allows us to be much more intentional and successful in our efforts to be an authentic Catholic school that is mission-minded in every way."

#### Transition Impact: Average SAT Performance

- 2016: 934
- 2017: 1025
- 2018: 1067
- 2019: 1084



# Holy Innocents School

## PK-8 Parish School | Long Beach, CA

In the spring of 2018, Cyril Cruz, then the second grade teacher at Holy Innocents School, knew almost nothing about the Catholic classical liberal arts tradition. Within months, she became a first-year principal overseeing a remarkable renewal at the low-income school in Long Beach, California.

After teaching at the school for six years, she and her colleagues grew concerned by the general decline in students' performance on standardized tests and, overall, a lack of progression in academics. The staff participated in a variety of professional development initiatives through the Archdiocese of Los Angeles which focused on Common Core standards and attempted to identify specific areas of weakness and strategies for improvement. Yet after going through this process year after year, and despite the best efforts of the dedicated teaching staff, the decline continued. It became clear to Cruz and others that an entirely different approach was necessary.

“We decided that we needed to go back to our roots and really reevaluate what Catholic education is, how to best share that with our families and students, and how to ingrain in them a love for our Lord through our curriculum,” she said. “And that led us to examine what our curriculum really was. We realized that it was segmented and skills-based. Yet, even while trying to focus on those skills, we were not hitting the mark.”

In March 2018, Fr. Peter Irving, pastor of Holy Innocents parish, arranged to have ICLE present an introductory workshop to the faculty in order to explore the possibility of a new vision for the school. The majority of the staff were excited by what they learned, including Gary Page, an eight-year veteran teacher and former small business owner, who was drawn to the all-encompassing nature of the Catholic liberal arts approach. In his words, “It's not just something that's compartmentalized into religion class, but it really is the most coherent way to explain reality itself. And the purpose of education is to help our children be able to grasp what reality is, what truth is, and to be able to know how to live according to that truth in their lives. That's what we call growing in wisdom and virtue.”



Following the positive reaction of his teachers, Fr. Irving arranged for a return visit from the Institute in May for a two-day teacher training workshop. He also sent the entire faculty either to the Institute's National Conference or its Spirit and Craft of Teaching in the Catholic Liberal Arts Tradition training program. The results of the shift, after just a few months, have been palpable.

"It's been amazing to see the teachers just light up and become themselves the life-long learners we encourage our students to be," said the new principal. Because the curriculum is rooted first and foremost in Christ as the ordering principle of the universe, Cruz observed that all knowledge, regardless of subject area, "is just lining up." Whether in religion, literature, history, math, or nature studies, students are seeing the true purpose of things—and that there is a higher purpose as well. The response has been joyful engagement and the sense that true learning is taking place. Cruz has found that teachers are able to make natural connections that in secular education would be neglected for the sake of a more pragmatic focus on skill-acquisition.

Perhaps the most unexpected development has been the students' dramatic improvement on the very tests that Cruz and her staff deliberately chose to ignore. Test standards and practice exams have been completely removed from the curriculum. Yet despite the shift, *after just one quarter*, Student Growth Percentiles (SGP) jumped an average of 56% in math, 53% in reading, and 61% in early literacy, including 84% in first grade. In previous years, SGP had hovered in the 10-20% range.

"We've never had that in our school before!" Cruz said. "The writing of our students is improving, the literature that's being discussed, the Socratic seminars that are taking place, the conversations that are happening out on the playground. ... I've never seen the school come alive in such a beautiful way. It truly is amazing." Best of all, Cruz is finding that the results are not limited to the students in the classroom. "Parents are jumping on board and we are seeing the fruits even within the home. Family culture is being brought back to life with the reclaiming of this education. And it's just December!"

*Family culture is being brought back to life with the reclaiming of this education.*

Cyril Cruz  
Principal



# St. Augustine Academy

## K-12 Independent School | Ventura, CA

St. Augustine Academy was founded in 1994 as an independent school in the Catholic liberal arts tradition. During the past 10 years as the total population in Archdiocesan schools plummeted by approximately 17%, St. Augustine Academy grew by 20%. With an impending move to a larger facility, enrollment is expected to jump another 12% in a single year.

A key feature of St. Augustine Academy's success is its intentionality about building itself as a community rather than as an institution. According to Headmaster Michael Van Hecke, who also serves as president of ICLE, he has learned that the first critical step is to form a faculty of friends who pursue truth together. This effort, in turn, has greatly increased the joy on campus and the consequent formation of the students. Among the fruits are better family support and engagement.

Investment in annual faculty professional development has risen to the equivalent of nearly one full faculty salary, obtained in part through federal Title II funding. "It was the greatest shift in budgetary allocations we have ever made, and it has had great payoffs," reports Van Hecke. "It has done wonders in preparing our new, young faculty in the basics of teaching in a classroom, and even greater wonders in our seasoned faculty by re-enlivening them in their vocation as Catholic teachers." St. Augustine's balance sheet has been in the black despite its commitment to invest in the educators at the heart of the school. As enrollment grew it hired new teachers and increased faculty salaries beyond diocesan salary scales, in addition to paying full insurance premiums for full-time faculty and their dependents.

As an independent school outside of any system, St. Augustine has not relied on secular standards for its yardstick. It sought and received accreditation through the Western Association of Schools and Colleges only after the University of California system required it for graduates to gain acceptance. In 2006, the superintendent of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles asked the academy to join its system of 270 schools. St. Augustine did join, with permission to retain important freedoms necessary to maintain its Catholic liberal arts philosophy and practice: freedom from standards and teacher credentials. Though the school does not have selective admissions, it ranks consistently in the top tier of the Archdiocesan high schools on College Board reporting. According to the school, its stellar results are due to an education focused on the human person, deep learning, great ideas, and Christ as the Logos. This education, rooted in a Christian anthropology, is guided by well-formed and deeply educated teachers who are not beholden to instructional fads.

As one parent recently commented, "We picked this school because we knew it was a good education, a good culture, and Catholic to the core. We had no idea how deeply it would impact and form our entire family. We are so grateful. God is so good."

### Transition Impact: Enrollment Growth

- 1994-1995: 26
  - 2000-2001: 58
  - 2008-2009: 131
  - 2012-2013: 154
  - 2015-2016: 161
  - 2018-2019: 162\*
- \*waiting list of 40*







*The Institute for*  
**CATHOLIC LIBERAL  
EDUCATION**  
*The Truth Shall Set You Free*

*The Institute for Catholic Liberal Education  
inspires and equips Catholic educators to renew today's Catholic schools  
by drawing on the Church's tradition of education, which frees teachers  
and students for the joyful pursuit of faith, wisdom, and virtue.*



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