

PANDEMIC PARTNERSHIP: Catholic Schools Are Making the Most of the Moment

By Steve Quattrociochi

This has not been the year for going it alone.

Regardless of age, race, ethnicity or religion, our individual worlds were foundationally shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic throughout 2020. Our everyday lives — our health, careers and social structures — were disrupted like never before.

The situation also shined a bright spotlight on the importance our education system plays in society. Beyond simply teaching our children, schools often provide care for students while their parents are at work. If we weren't aware before, we now fully understand that life doesn't run smoothly unless our kids' schooling does.

Nonpublic schools across the country have turned to Catapult Learning for instructional services, professional development and specialized services for 45 years. Though challenged this past year, our team at Catapult wasted little time examining the “new normal” and quickly developed methods to best serve our partners at this critical juncture.

To rise to the occasion, moments like these require us to rely on partnership. And the education administrations within the Catholic dioceses offer a perfect example of partnership and leadership. When the pandemic first took root, it quickly became evident that adjustments would be required to fully support





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students and their families, no matter how difficult the circumstances. The dioceses understood that.

We've watched Catholic school administrators overcome many challenges caused by COVID-19 and, through the collaboration and partnership with Catholic educators across the country, we've witnessed firsthand how they've continuously pivoted, innovated and delivered quality, caring instruction — at home and in the classroom.

Archdiocese of Chicago

Those focused on overcoming pandemic-driven educational hurdles included administrators within the Archdiocese of Chicago, who thought out of the box to address their students' needs.

Catapult is a longtime provider of Title I services for students within the Archdiocese of Chicago. It has also worked closely with schools throughout the organization to strengthen their professional development capabilities. In August, the relationship expanded, as Catapult added special education services related to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This new partnership serves more than 1,000 Catholic school students throughout the city.

The already successful relationship has been further strengthened during the pandemic. That's in no small part due to the leadership of Phyllis Cavallone.

Cavallone, chief of academics for the Archdiocese of Chicago, had a problem to solve as she looked toward the 2020-2021 school year: while the archdiocese's goal was to do everything possible to keep schools open and safe during the pandemic, for some students that wasn't an option. Many had health conditions that prevented their return. Others were now living too far from their home districts, taken in by relatives and separated from parents who were frontline workers.

So, Cavallone had an idea.

She asked Catapult if we could create an



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online platform that gave these Catholic school students from all around Chicago the option to join a shared virtual learning environment while — and this is crucial — remaining as closely tied to their own school as possible.

“It was a really wonderful, heartfelt need that led them to ask if we could do this,” said Sarah Swiatkowski, regional director for Chicagoland at Catapult Learning. “They needed to create a stop-gap. They didn’t want students taken from their schools, but they understood that, for now, many couldn’t be there.”

With this direction, we got to work and quickly built the platform — the Catapult eLearning program, a completely new and unique online school year, split into three trimesters. eLearning serves children in kindergarten through eighth grade. Right now about 140 students from 21 different schools take all their core classes virtually with a Catapult teacher, while remaining engaged with their own Catholic school.

Each student is dual-enrolled in their home school and Catapult eLearning, so they can reach out to their own principals and other educators, and have religion class with their own school. They’re still very much connected to their schools, and their schools to them.

“The holistic approach that we were going for with this undertaking

was ensuring our students didn’t give up their Catholic identity,” said Cavallone. “We didn’t want them giving up their schools, their families and friends, their church communities, their educators. With dual enrollment, we’ve managed to maintain the best of both worlds, supporting the social-emotional needs of our kids during a really important time.”

The archdiocese now offers several other learning options to students as a result of the pandemic, all while working steadfastly to maintain in-person learning.

“That’s another part of the story,” said Swiatkowski. “They have done a phenomenal job keeping their schools open and safe.”

Clearly, the pandemic has affected educational environments differently due to geography and other dynamics, and each of Catapult’s Catholic school partners have had to learn from others, while best serving their own schools’ particular needs.

Diocese of Orlando

The Diocese of Orlando, also a Catapult Learning partner, operates in a state where in-school learning has remained more of a norm throughout the pandemic than in other areas of the country. Of course, virtual learning has also been employed and it remains a valuable tool.

One Diocese of Orlando student is currently participating from New York, while living with her grandmother, because she has a single mom who has to work during the pandemic.

“Through our partnership with Catapult, we’re able to continue educating our students — even those who are out of state due to the pandemic,” said Henry Fortier, secretary of education and superintendent of schools. “We worked together closely over the summer to provide training to diocese teachers on remote learning tools to ensure they were fully prepared to take on a hybrid teaching model.”

And although the Diocese of Orlando realizes that the pandemic is a serious and important issue requiring focused attention, it hasn’t lost sight of other imperatives, such as diversity, equity and inclusion.

“Despite everything going on with COVID-19, we still need to focus on other important topics impacting our students,” Fortier said.

The diocese has also been particularly focused on its coaching initiatives, working with Catapult this past year to strengthen instructional practices to help students improve their academic performance. One institution, St. Andrew Catholic School, based in the Pine Hills neighborhood of Orlando,



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brought in a coach from Catapult for almost the entire school year to focus on improving the school's math offering.

"It was a perfect match for them, and math is certainly a focus for the diocese," said Annette Charles, territory vice president for Catapult Learning. "Kids coming out of a pandemic need more math support because a lot of what they've been getting is literacy."

Another area where the Diocese of Orlando and Catapult have come together recently is on the administration of CARES Act funding through the Orange County Public Schools. "The experts at Catapult have played a critical role in helping us navigate funding resource channels," said Fortier.

Regardless of where our Catholic school partners operate, Catapult Learning's relationships within the diocese have strengthened this past year, and the organization's teachers and administrators have gained important new skills that will help them throughout their careers.

Archdiocese of New York

The Archdiocese of New York, a longtime Catapult Learning partner, launched an extended learning day program for students in K-8 to ensure children were getting the extra supports they needed. The free after-school academic and social-emotional enrichment program helped supplement the core curriculum.

Sessions were designed to include a holistic experience for students, composed of targeted math and literacy instruction, as well as STEM and social-emotional learning (SEL) activities to encourage personal growth in a collaborative virtual classroom.

"As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact our lives, it is essential that we support our students and families with additional resources," said Michael J. Deegan, superintendent of schools, Archdiocese of New York. "Through this partnership, our

Catholic Schools are rising to the many challenges we face today."

Parents are among those for whom support is crucial right now, so Catapult Learning put together free, virtual workshops that gave parents strategies to improve their children's wellness and set them up for success. Topics include elementary school social-emotional learning, incorporating IEPs at home, bullying prevention and managing anxiety.

"Our mission to provide a Christ-centered, academically excellent education for students did not waver during the pandemic and we rose to the occasion by increasing resources for the entire family," said Michael J. Coppotelli, senior associate superintendent, Archdiocese of New York. "We heard directly from parents who were grateful to have these additional supports at their disposal during such difficult times."

Stronger Together

As the pandemic continues, and hopefully wanes in 2021, there is reason for optimism. We've pushed each other and we're better for it. Because of the leadership and innovative approach of our Catholic school partners, the team at Catapult Learning is in a stronger position to support students, teachers and families. "We've survived a pandemic with them," Charles said. "All of us will come out stronger on the other side."

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