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Companions on the Journey

January 28, 2023

Dear Friends,

Today begins Catholic School's Week across the United States. In 1953 I started first grade at St. David parish school in Willow Grove. The next year the Archdiocese opened a new parish called Saint John of the Cross in Roslyn. I went to that school from 2nd through 8th grade. For four of those years, I was in a split classroom, meaning that there were about 55 kids in the class, half were fifth grade and half were sixth. The Sister would teach 28 kids and assign seat work for the other half of the class. Then she would flip flop, teaching one class and assigning new seat work to the other. I didn't think anything of that was odd. I was a kid. What did I know? I just thought that was the way things were. I received a good education and felt I was prepared for citizenship in the country and service and worship in the realm of my faith. And it was free, just like the public schools were free. How could that be? Well the Religious Sisters taught and their community would receive a modest stipend from the parish for each nun and that stipend came from the collection plate of the parish Sunday Mass. Free. Most Catholic kids went to Catholic schools.

Same was true for high school—for a time. When I went to Bishop McDevitt High School in 1961 it was tuition free but there was a book fee of \$50. In high school though there were lay men and lay women who worked as teachers for very low wages. The parishes also supported the high schools financially. Slowly it became clear that the families who were availing themselves of these schools would have to pay something of the cost. Tuition was initiated in the late 1960's. It was low because there were so many students (the Baby Boomers) that if a lot of people paid a little there would be enough to pay the teachers and run the schools.

But as the number of students declined following the birthrate, and the number of Religious Sisters and Diocesan priests declined as well, the number of lay teachers increased. They were family wage earners and they needed to earn a living wage. The rest, as they say is history. But fast forward to 2023 and our elementary school which is Our Lady of Mercy. We have over 430 students from Kindergarten to 8th grade. This year's graduating class will be awarded over one half million

dollars in high school scholarships. All of our teachers are degreed, certified and many have Masters Degrees in their area of expertise. Every day all of the students gather in the Gym and Mrs. Gandolfo leads everyone in prayer. Our test scores have remained high despite the ravages of the corona-virus. Class size is 17 or 18 students occasionally higher.

Our parish elementary school is a regional school: Our Lady of Mercy. It is located on the campus of Saint Alphonsus parish in Maple Glen, on Conwell Drive. An excellent school with many state of the art facilities and programs. Accredited by Middle States and presently recognized as a United States Blue Ribbon school achieved after our sixth year of existence. There is an Open House this Sunday (today) from 11:00 to 1:00 Stop in and see what a Catholic school education looks like in the 21st century. And pray for the success of our school.

In the peace of Christ,
Msgr. McHenry