

**Diocese of Bridgeport Foundations in Education
Delivered by George B. Irish
Wee Burn Country Club
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Good evening. Your Excellency, Bishop Caggiano, friends, and supporters of Catholic Education.

On September 5, 1950, I began a personal journey with Catholic Education that continues to this day, 65 years later.

While the structure of the students' day may have been different and we certainly had more Sisters and Priests involved in our education, the essential charism of those providing Catholic Education has not changed.

In my day, every student in our school was Catholic. We started every day with Mass and the daily reception of Communion followed by breakfast because we fasted from midnight. We made our First Confession and First Holy Communion and we were Confirmed as part of our education. Our spiritual formation was integral to our education.

Most of us came from homes with two parents, our moms mostly stayed at home, our environment was safe and our family incomes were modest. Education was the parish responsibility, every parish had a grade school and plenty of Sisters ... and our parents were actively involved in our education.

Service to others was a constant theme. We talked a lot about Christian charity and pursuing a life of giving to others, just as our teacher role-models were doing.

In my home there was a lot of focus and support for giving your very best to everything you did in life whether it be spiritual, academic, sports, scouting, or my paper route. That was reinforced in school.

Our teachers gave so much of themselves, just as Catholic Education teachers do today and their sole focus was on the development of their students' soul, minds and character.

Today, as I am privileged to participate in Catholic education through my charitable foundation work and as a board member of the Inner-City Scholarship Fund in New York City, I visit classrooms and talk with principals and superintendents regularly.

Today, I see that same commitment in Catholic schools to the soul, mind and character that I was experiencing 65 years ago.

While daily Mass and Communion may not be part of the every-day curriculum, and many families are under pressures unknown in my time, and in many families there is only one parent, the “miracle of Catholic Education” continues to make a big difference in the lives of millions of students across the globe.

Catholic schools continue to offer academic excellence and faith-based experience. While newspaper headlines suggest enrollment is declining and schools are closing ... and some are ... the real story is that there is strong demand and enthusiasm for Catholic schools.

Today there are about 6,600 catholic schools with a student-to-teacher ratio of 13 to 1.

Catholic secondary schools have a graduation rate of 99%, while the public schools graduate 78% nationally. And in New York City, we know that number is closer to 50%.

Nationwide, approximately 90% of Catholic secondary school graduates attend college. Those numbers in Fairfield County are even higher.

The remarkable news is that Catholic education is available to students across the economic spectrum. While the cost of Catholic education is significantly below public education cost, it is still slightly over \$12,000 per pupil each year ... and out of reach for most families.

Fortunately, through the generosity of those who know the value of Catholic education, many students are afforded the opportunity that otherwise wouldn't be available to them.

In New York City, we are also raising an endowment to ensure that students will have the opportunity to attend a Catholic school. Interestingly, many contributions have been made by non-Catholics who know the value and

success of Catholic education. I know the same is happening in the Diocese of Bridgeport.

Catholic schools have a unique mission and culture. As with any school, academic experience, formation of culture, inculcation of civic engagement are key features of what they do. Catholic schools additionally are charged with passing on religious faith to the next generation.

In my generation, Catholic schools' role was to provide a Catholic education to Catholic children. Today, the mission is to provide a Catholic education to anyone. Respectful of the religious backgrounds that non-Catholic students bring, schools encourage spiritual and moral development based on Catholic philosophy.

I applaud the efforts of Bishop Caggiano and the Diocese of Bridgeport in establishing "Foundations in Education" to promote innovation, transformation, and support of education in Catholic Schools.

This will help sustain an already outstanding record of achievement in the 38 schools that educate 10,000 students here in Fairfield County.

These schools offer students excellent academics and strong faith-filled communities to help students develop knowledge and values to carry them through college into their future roles as parents and leaders.

In Bridgeport, 98% of 8th graders are admitted to the high school of their choice, and 99% of high school seniors are college bound.

The students in the Fairfield County Catholic schools score 3 grades higher in reading and language arts and a full grade higher in math than the national average.

That's certainly a record to be proud of and one that should be applauded and sustained.

As I close I'd like to quote from a Catholic high school senior. Jeannie and I have the privilege of spending a week each year with 104 of the sharpest students from across the country selected for the United States Senate Youth Program funded by the William Randolph Hearst Foundation. One of the delegates to that program, Caroline Yapp, a senior at Hackett Catholic Prep in Kalamazoo, Michigan wrote to me about her Catholic education.

“My Catholic school experience can be summed up in one word – community. Our chaplain's weekly homily has managed to shine a light on the most difficult issues facing our students and caused us to reflect, contemplate, and grow together, not only in our faith, but in the way we treat one another. Knowing the suffering faced by others has guided us collectively to be better, more compassionate people.

By having a Priest present in our building, we are reminded not only of who we are but of who God wants us to be. I feel incredibly fortunate to have been given the opportunity to attend a Catholic school. The education I have received has shaped me into the person I am today. Because of the

values instilled in me through my Catholic education, I know I want to spend the rest of my life in service to others.” Well said.

Thank you.