

Supporting the Whole Family and Community

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While the classroom is the nucleus of the educational systems around the world, Catholic education goes beyond the four walls, past the science fairs, spelling bees and religious education classes. Centering on the dignity of the person and building of community, Catholic education develops the whole person and challenges each student to reach his or her God-given potential.

The Siena Catholic School system in Racine understands that despite the challenge of distance learning, maintaining contact through social media is integral in maintaining relationships between students, parents, teachers and staff.

“Parents and students alike love their teachers and love hearing from them,” said Kimberly Gardner, senior manager of marketing and communications. “Highlighting successes and simply sharing greetings have been helpful. St. Rita School, for example, records their daily announcements and shares on the educational app Class DoJo. They say their morning prayer, the Pledge of Allegiance, the core values of the school, any announcements, and Principal Jennifer Jeffers even shows a ‘secret location’ via different Zoom backgrounds and hints. The locations are revealed the next day.”

Additionally, Siena Catholic Schools have made meals available to all children in the community younger than 18. Multiple meals are available twice a week at two locations to ensure options for all.

“We’ve also advertised other meal options in the general area and have worked with principals, teachers and counselors to identify any families who might need deliveries made directly to their home,” said Gardner.

Most of the students attending Messmer Catholic Schools attend through the School Choice voucher program and live in some of Milwaukee’s hardest hit zip codes for COVID-19. Lisamarie Arnold, director of admissions and community relations, said staff reached out to help families affected physically, emotionally and financially from the virus.

“Attendance the first week was at 75 percent, but after we distributed several hundred Chromebooks for those needing electronic devices, our online attendance and



▲ Messmer Catholic Schools have provided needed supplies for members of its community throughout the current health crisis. (Submitted photo)

engagement improved to 90 percent,” Arnold said. “Additionally, we immediately distributed learning packets and started the meal distribution. We responded out of a deepened sense of mission – with an awareness that entire families are being affected in unimaginable ways. We continue to respond unconditionally and despite having limited resources, we make no excuses.”

Once distance learning began St. Gabriel School in Hubertus expanded their Chromebook program so all students in grades 2-8 have Chromebooks to use at home. In addition, a dedicated technology coordinator regularly assists parents and students with any computer or internet issues they might have, including a lockbox at the school entrance to swap non-functioning components, explained Bridget Bartholomew, principal of the school.

A recent grant provided the school with a counselor/wellness resource individual.

“This individual has been available to provide support to students and families, consulting as needed if issues arise,” said Bartholomew, adding, “Our parish has been sponsoring a food drive for our shared food pantry with St. Boniface. Our lunch program manager has been delivering birthday treats to students, providing free baked goods pickup at the parish.”

After Milwaukee’s St. Anthony School switched to remote learning, school staff quickly realized their

school families were struggling financially due to the pandemic and they wanted to help.

Administrators began the St. Anthony School April Angels Family Relief Fund and raised over \$15,000 to assist school families in need, explained Ellen Wilkinson, Director of Administration.

“Identified through virtual surveys and staff outreach, 27 St. Anthony School families currently receive support from April Angels,” she said. “The sustainability of this initiative is furthered with the recent addition of drive-by meal services provided through a partnership with the Milwaukee Center for Independence.”

In addition to meals, St. Anthony is distributing hygiene products as well as financially assisting 40 families identified through their parent check in surveys.

“We are doing the best we can to support them in this difficult time,” said Wilkinson.

A group of volunteers and pastoral staff reach out to families by phone, prayed with them and shared what pastoral care resources were available to families of St. Joseph School in Grafton.

Students participated in the Kapco Hero Mail Call and made cards for essential workers, said Principal Amanda Matthews.

“They also made cards for nursing home residents and helped with our ongoing collection drive for inner city shelter,” she said. “We also extended our scholarship drive to help families financially affected by the COVID-19 crisis to continue to afford tuition.”

The school’s efforts, including the creation of an online Lancer Gram system for family and friends to write encouraging notes to their eighth-grade graduates, has not gone unnoticed by school parents, such as Michelle Uttke, who sent a note to staff.

“From the first email as the pandemic made the shores of the U.S., admitting that a plan for homeschooling would be very difficult given the available resources,” Uttke said. “We are going to figure out how to do this and start holding classes on Wednesday, March 18. It has been nothing short of amazing. I truly cannot believe how it all came together while other schools in our district are still struggling to figure it out.”