

Schools express their unique qualities

written by Aprille Hanson Spivey |



Charlotte Hylden, 6, a first-grade student at Our Lady of the Holy Souls School in Little Rock, proudly wore her sticker with a red heart and blue cross that read “Wabbits Have H.E.A.R.T.”

Hylden earned her sticker for being engaged in her math assignments, working quietly so as not to disturb others. That dedication to school work rings true to the characteristics of “H.E.A.R.T” — honorable, engaged, academic, respectful and a team member. But it’s more than a sticker and an announcement in the morning of which students were recognized. It’s recognition that a student is acting in a way that lives out the charism of the school.

The sticker program was started last year, as Our Lady of the Holy Souls School in Little Rock and others throughout the diocese have looked closer at what makes their Catholic schools unique. The Catholic Schools Office encouraged each school to identify their charism, what a school is called to be, and create a culture centered on that identity.

“It’s so important to keep our Catholic identity alive and strong in our schools,” said Marguerite Olberts, associate superintendent of Catholic Schools. “This is a wonderful way for our schools to take a step back and review how they project that charism and culture to their school community, parish and outside community and to see if it truly coincides to what they should be projecting of a Catholic school.”

Cultivating identity

Vernell Bowen, superintendent of Catholic Schools, heard Dr. Timothy Cook speak about his book “Charism and Culture: Cultivating Catholic Identity in Catholic Schools” at a National Catholic Educational Association conference and asked principals to read it beginning in 2016.

“When you read through the book it gives so many concrete ways you can assess this. It gives you a good firm idea of what it (charism) is,” and how it can be translated into the culture of the school, Olberts said. “... Ok, what is our history, what is our identity? Are we connected to a saint?”

Each school has the commonality of Catholicism, but just as people in the pews are different, so are the schools and what they bring to the Universal Church and world.

Our Lady of the Holy Souls was started by the Olivetan Benedictine sisters in 1927. Though there are no sisters teaching at the school today “it’s important for us to keep that spirit alive,” said Ileana Dobbins, principal at Holy Souls.

Their Helping Others Program or “H.O.P.,” which picks a different charity or organization to adopt each month, now makes sure the students are actively involved in giving, Dobbins said. Students have made prayer cards for Eucharistic ministers to the sick to pass along and welcome cards that Settled Souls ministry gives to homeless from Jericho Way day resource center who have just found a home.

“With the cards to Settled Souls, we do talk about homelessness and there are people helping those who were homeless start a better life,” Dobbins said, adding that real-world application helps students learn about the world and their place in it.

Taking action

For at least 13 years, St. Joseph School in Fayetteville has followed the school motto: “I will try my best every day to learn, love others and to act like Jesus.” Before receiving the book, principal Jason Pohlmeier said the school had already been “trying to really get an idea of who we were and what really made our school special.”

“Our students are naturally fit to be leaders,” he said, adding that the school is focused on “Turning out leaders with a Catholic world view, with a Catholic perspective to lead our world to Christ.”

Students have always been service-minded, like assisting the Cooperative Emergency Outreach by collecting food and toiletry items and helping to stock it at the center. When eighth-grade students return from their annual Washington D.C. trip and the seventh grade from Heifer Ranch in Perryville, they spend a “day of service,” around northwest Arkansas, Pohlmeier said.

But through this focused view, the motto’s action words — learn, love, act — have taken hold at the school.

The words are displayed on student T-shirts, the top of their school website and parents are using the hashtag #learnloveact while sharing school information.

A key emphasis in “Charism and Culture” is to not only to identify a school’s charism but find ways to make sure policies, logos and a mission statement relate to it, Olberts said.

“Over the past year or so, we have really started to try and brand things with those three words,” Pohlmeier said. “Every little thing we do I could fit into a category of how they’re loving others, acting like Jesus or learning to be better. It’s become a way of life.”

The concept of charism is something the Catholic Schools Office hopes all schools in the diocese strive to understand better.

“We’ve certainly seen a number of schools take steps to do this and ... we think more will continue. It will only make schools stronger,” Olberts said.