

Leaders assess successes of 2020-2021 school year

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Graduation expected to be more nearly normal in May

Catholic high schools in Arkansas are moving forward with in-person graduation ceremonies for the class of 2021 after the COVID-19 pandemic canceled or postponed most of the events last year.

Catholic High School principal Steve Straessle said the Little Rock high school has held graduation outside for seven years and will continue that tradition this year. The safety concerns are similar to last year, but “not quite as urgent,” as society has more information about the virus, he said.

At the moment, Straessle said they plan to limit the number of people who can attend but he is hopeful “by mid-May we’ll be able to open it up. We’ll see; a month is a long time.”

Here is how high schools plan to hold graduation, as of April 14:

St. Joseph High School, Conway

- Graduates: 47
- Location: St. Joseph Church, May 16, 5 p.m.

- Following diocesan protocols issued April 1

Catholic High School, Little Rock

- Graduates: 184
- Location: CHS football field, May 28
- Limited tickets and livestreamed

Mount St. Mary Academy, Little Rock

- Graduates: 131
- Location: Robinson Center in Little Rock, May 24
- Safety protocols still being discussed with the venue

Sacred Heart High School, Morrilton

- Graduates: 18
- Location: Sacred Heart gym, May 16, 4 p.m.
- Safety protocols still being discussed

Subiaco Academy, Subiaco

- Graduates: 39
- Location: Subiaco courtyard, May 15
- Each graduate will receive 10 tickets

Ozark Catholic Academy, Tontitown

- Graduates: 12

- Location: Jones Center in Springdale, May 22
- In-person and livestreamed, with plans at the moment to limit attendance to immediate family

After a year of mask-wearing, social distancing and an endless supply of hand sanitizer, Catholic schools in Arkansas can see a glimmer of light on the horizon with vaccinations and an eye toward graduation.

Theresa Hall, superintendent for Catholic Schools, said the lessons learned from the 2020-2021 school year during the COVID-19 pandemic will be useful for the future.

“It has made us think what can we do, how can we do things a little bit different. Sometimes we’re creatures of habit and sometimes it’s easy to stay doing what we always do because it works, but this has made us think outside the box and what can we do differently,” Hall said. “This makes you stop and think, ‘This is working or this is not working.’ It makes us reevaluate what we’re doing and how we do things like fundraising, recess, sports, teaching.”

While COVID cases across the state spiked from November to early January, there have been only five positive COVID cases, from March 27 to April 19, reported to the Catholic Schools Office. Hall said that success has been “a little bit of everything,” from socially distanced classrooms and activities, mask wearing and keeping students within their grades or classroom groups.

“We’ve had more students come back that started out virtual too, so we’ve even got more students in the schools,” she said.

Teacher and staff vaccinations have been key to relaxing some restrictions, from not having to take temperatures in the mornings to 3-foot instead of 6-foot distancing. Though, with just six weeks left of school, many schools continue the 6-foot distance, keeping in place the signage and routines the students have adhered to all year. Masks are still mandatory in schools.

Teachers were part of the first vaccination category for the state, starting in January. As of April 12, 84 percent of teachers and staff had been vaccinated in Catholic schools, according to 18 schools that replied to Arkansas Catholic’s request. Three schools reported that 100 percent of staff were fully vaccinated.

Hall said just like public schools in the state, schools cannot require teachers and staff to receive the COVID-19 vaccines. Some schools, like Mount St. Mary Academy in Little Rock, held an on-site vaccine clinic for their faculty and staff.

“We would probably follow the guidelines of the Department of Health,” Hall said. “If they make it (the COVID-19 vaccine) a requirement, it’d be like our immunizations — if we have a student that is not immunized we must have on record why they are not immunized. They have to complete forms for the Department of Health.”

Catholic High School in Little Rock, St. John School in Hot Springs and Holy Rosary School in Stuttgart had 100 percent of their teachers vaccinated.

On Jan. 21 and Feb. 11, vaccine clinics were held at Catholic High by Don's Pharmacy in Little Rock. It also hosted a vaccine clinic for students 16 and older April 15.

"I in no way said you have to take the vaccine. There was no punitive part to it at all," said principal Steve Straessle.

The school has 50 teachers and staff.

"It just underscored our faculty's one-mind-one-mission mentality. We want to be here with the kids in front of us."

Fountain Lake Pharmacy offered vaccines for all teachers of Hot Springs schools. St. John principal Janet Edgar said her 20 teachers and staff, as well as Fathers George Sanders, Ravi Rayappa Gudipalli and Jules Norbert Njopmo were vaccinated. The school has not offered virtual learning, instead being in-person all year.

"(The teachers) showed up, they were worried just like everyone else. We had some teachers that were really hesitant about coming back, we have a lot of older teachers that have been here 30-plus years," that were concerned about being around students, Edgar said, crediting the parents for keeping children who were sick at home.

Absences were up this year because of it. "I think everybody feels a lot more secure and confident now that they have their shots."

School secretary Patty Owens said she feels "fabulous" after getting her vaccine.

"I would do a backflip if I wasn't 63 years old," Owens said, adding she's been cautious during the pandemic for her own health, her husband and for her family. "I'm so proud of them (teachers) for doing that, for their health and safety. It's just not a question, just do it."

Holy Rosary School in Stuttgart also had their four teachers, two assistants and one secretary, along with the pastor Father Andrew Hart and church secretary vaccinated, said principal Kathy Lorince.

"We didn't miss any days at all. We've had no virtual days. Our parents were so happy we were back in school. We were diligent with temperatures, the whole nine yards, masks, distanced. Very cautious and proactive. Plus we're small, so it makes it easier," she said, looking forward to the fall. "I hope we're back to the old days. I think it's made us more aware of being more careful, cautious. Whatever I'm told to do, we'll do it," as far as safety precautions.

Elementary schools and high schools plan to go forward with graduations (see sidebar).

Hall said it's hard to say what the fall semester will look like in terms of mask-wearing and other protocols.

"It will depend on if our numbers continue to go down like they are. Maybe we won't have to wear masks, we don't know yet. It's too early to make that call," Hall said.

A discussion on the need for virtual learning is on-going.

"Some schools really would just like to go to in-person only. There probably will be some schools that offer that virtual option for those that really have underlying medical issues and

might need it."