

# Report: Catholic schools recovered faster from pandemic

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |



## Report card

The National Assessment of Educational Progress, released in October, shows the academic success of fourth and eighth graders in math and reading in public and Catholic schools. The assessments are given every two years to students in both grades.

### Catholic schools national

Fourth-grade reading - 233

“We learned that we could do hard things that we didn’t know we could do. I am grateful that we are on the other side of the pandemic, and I hope we never have to go through anything like that again.”

Fourth-grade math - 246

Eighth-grade reading - 279

Eighth-grade math - 288

### Public schools national

Fourth-grade reading - 216

Fourth-grade math - 235

Eighth-grade reading - 259

Eighth-grade math - 273

Catholic schools have bounced back from the COVID-19 pandemic faster than their public-school counterparts, according to the National Catholic Educational Association.

Officials with the Diocese of Little Rock's Office of Catholic Schools and administrators across the state said they were not surprised by the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, known as "The Nation's Report Card."

The NCEA called the biennial report from the U.S. Department of Education "the most consistent measure of U.S. student achievement over time."

The NCEA said Catholic schools' scores have nearly returned to pre-pandemic levels, except for eighth-grade math, which is still five points behind but 15 points higher than public school eighth graders.

Theresa Hall, superintendent for Catholic schools, said teaching students through the pandemic was a challenge, but she credits schools' staffs for springing into action to make sure students received the best education possible.

"When schools closed in March 2020 due to the pandemic, the principals and teachers quickly worked together to decide what would be the best way for their students to continue their education for the remainder of the school year," she said. "During the summer of 2020, our office continued communicating with the principals through regular Zoom meetings in which the principals would share ideas and best practices that worked and some things that didn't work as well.

All schools in the Diocese of Little Rock were virtual from March-May 2020 and reopened in August 2020 with options for in-person or virtual classes. In-person learning returned full-time in August 2021 in all schools.

"During the 2020-2021 school year, even if students were out with COVID, most of our schools operated with synchronized classes at home and school. So even though not everyone was in person, the teachers were teaching, and the students were learning."

Kathy House, principal of Christ the King School in Little Rock, said she is proud of her students, who worked hard through the distractions of wearing masks, sitting six feet from their neighbors and eating lunch in their classrooms to continue their education as normally as possible.

"I think the kids were so happy to be at school with their friends," she said. "They cooperated with every form of social distancing and followed all the rules. They continued to work hard and learn."

She said teachers deserve a lot of credit and recognition for their efforts, too.

"The teachers are definitely the heroes of the story," House said. "We were open every day

beginning in the fall of 2020. We offered a virtual option that required our teachers to teach in person and at the same time have the kids at home Zoom in. The burden really fell on the shoulders of our teachers. It was extremely difficult for them to come to school every day, teach kids in person and at home, travel from class to class (rather than the students changing classes) and still bear the responsibility for the health and safety of their families, their students and themselves.

"I cannot ever thank these teachers and staff enough for the heroic efforts they made to continue the mission of teaching our children in the middle of a worldwide pandemic," she said. "They stayed positive, loving and devoted to the kids. They led by example. They wore their masks; they didn't complain. They just kept teaching."

Subiaco Academy Headmaster David Wright said he was not surprised by the NCEA's report.

"Catholic Schools stayed open and were better equipped to pivot when (it was) necessary to do so," he said. "We had multiple days and weeks when our teachers held in-person learning while synchronously using Google classroom for those students in isolation or quarantine. It was truly amazing."

Support from student's families was critical to their success.

"Through a very robust communication plan, our families were 'all in' and understood our goal of staying open for in-person learning" he said.

Wright said the only troublesome area for Subiaco Academy through the pandemic has been math.

"As the curriculum is more linear in this subject, it makes sense that even a slight interruption in learning will have a lingering effect," he said.

Amber Bagby, principal of Our Lady of the Holy Souls School in Little Rock, said schools are also dealing with social and emotional repercussions of the pandemic, especially in elementary grades.

"When you have 4-year-olds that were homebound during the developmental years of building social skills, you have some work to do," she said.

Bagby said the community-focused nature of Catholic schools was "a critical variable."

"I strongly feel that that component alone is what makes us stand apart from our public schools at all times," she said. "When teachers know the families and their hurdles, they are more equipped to meet the students where they are. As a community we take care of each other."

Lee Ann Owen, principal of St. Mary School in Paragould, said student performance was impacted by the pandemic in spring 2020 but recovered quickly the following school year.

"We returned to face-to-face learning and did not offer a virtual option," she said. "This helped a lot in keeping instruction consistent. My faculty was very helpful in keeping the learning gap to a minimum. They went above and beyond to tutor and reteach when it was needed."

Another bright spot in the NAEP and NCEA reports is that for the first time in two decades,

enrollment in Catholic schools across the United States increased by 62,000.

Catholic schools in Arkansas saw a 2 percent increase in enrollment, growing from 6,320 in the 2021-2022 school year to 6,451 students this year, Hall said.

“I believe the Catholic schools’ increased enrollment was partly from what parents were sharing with other parents of what our schools were doing during the uncertain times,” she said.

Hall credits not only schools’ staffs but also parents for navigating the pandemic successfully.

“The parents, especially the ones with younger children, often had to help their children log on to devices and help more than in a normal school year,” she said, “but everyone was adjusting and making the best of the time.”

“We were blessed to have come through that tough time,” House said. “We learned that we could do hard things that we didn't know we could do. I am grateful that we are on the other side of the pandemic, and I hope we never have to go through anything like that again.”