

The Church of St. Joseph

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STATEMENT ON ST. JOSEPH SCHOOL HARVARD

March 3rd, 2016

I would like to begin my remarks this evening by sharing with you, what I believe is a very powerful statement that frames all that we are called to do whether we are parishioners, parents, students, clergy or lay employees. This is the Mission of Catholic Schools. It states:

“The Mission of Catholic Schools in the Rockford Diocese is to ensure that the person of Jesus Christ is proclaimed, learned, experienced and lived by students in their homes, their classrooms, their parishes, and in their communities at large. We pursue the development of the whole child through spiritual, academic, and physical formation; working together with parents, clergy, and parish communities. The ultimate goal of the educational process is to form dynamic, responsible and service-oriented adult Catholics who participate fully in the sacramental life of the Church and are empowered by their love for God and desire for eternal salvation.”

For the past 99 years, St. Joseph Parish and School have worked to accomplish that mission. Over almost a century we have had a parish where Catholic families come to practice their faith and pass that faith on to their children. The Catholic faith, and the education of children in that faith, begins in the home. It is nurtured and affirmed through active participation in the Mass and the sacraments as well as in living the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church. The transmission of the faith and the teachings of the Church to our youth continues as well through various parish ministries such as religious education classes, Youth Ministry and sometimes, where possible, through classes offered in a Catholic context at a parish school.

The parish commitment here at St. Joseph's to the school and its families over these many years has been steadfast despite declining enrollment, depressed economies and shifts in religious and secular demographics. Because of our commitment to assist in helping to form Catholic children into “dynamic, responsible and service oriented adult Catholics” our parish has financially sacrificed and supported its students and families regardless of their ability to pay and regardless of their participation in the parish. In fact, the parish of St. Joseph has been overwhelmingly generous with its limited resources in order to keep our parish school open. This has come at a great sacrifice.

Unfortunately our parish has sacrificed beyond its financial means. The reserves set aside for Catholic School education have been depleted.

This does not mean our commitment to the faith and our families has lessened, but it does mean that the health and vitality of our parish as well as the viability of our other educational and formation ministries are at serious risk.

This situation is not new. Our parish and our school community have been aware for at least the last several years that enrollment has declined. Since 2009 we have had fewer than 100 students. For many years we have had combined classes. Despite enormous sacrifice, our parish still assisted all families whether they were Catholic or not. However, the stark reality is that declining enrollment means declining revenue. What has not declined, unfortunately, is the cost of operating the school through a safe environment and with a quality teaching staff. The parish is currently providing almost two-thirds of the resources to cover the cost of operating a school

that works to educate an ever dwindling number of children.

Funding for tuition assistance from financial reserves is gone. Savings to help operate the school and further our diocesan mission for Catholic Schools are gone. In order to stay viable, St. Joseph school would need to more than double its current enrollment. It would also need to ensure that each current student would pay full tuition. Despite many good and creative efforts to increase enrollment over the past years, enrollment has continued to decline.

While our parish has struggled to meet the increased costs of trying to provide a quality Catholic education in our school, other important ministries and religious education through the parish have been heavily sacrificed. To put the parish and school into a deficit spending situation and to ignore the many needs that remain at the parish would not only be irresponsible but would be an injustice to all of our families, the hardworking staff and to the students themselves.

So it is with a heavy heart that I must inform you that after much prayer and consultation with our parish and school leadership, diocesan leadership in education and finance, the decision has been made to discontinue elementary educational services at St. Joseph School here. The decision is effective on the last day of class of the 2015-2016 school year, SET FOR MAY 24TH, 2016.

All families with children in St. Joseph School are invited and encouraged to continue their Catholic elementary education at St. Mary School in Woodstock. All students of St. Joseph are welcome to register immediately. Families that are currently active members of St. Joseph Parish can attend St. Mary School for the same in-parish tuition rate charged here in Harvard. Families that are currently not active members of St. Joseph Parish will be charged the Harvard out-of-parish tuition rate at St. Mary's. This will apply to any student currently in Pre-kindergarten through 7th Grade here at St. Joseph.

For those interested or in need of transportation from St. Joseph to St. Mary School, transportation arrangements will be provided for the 2016-2017 school year.

In addition, to fully welcome St. Joseph students and to assist in making this transition an easier one, St. Mary School will be inviting those interested to attend a Shadowing Day and will also offer tours of the school for families.

And in regard to St. Joseph School staff, all of our teachers are being given first opportunity for any openings within the diocesan Catholic School system. The Rockford Diocese will be assisting all staff in securing employment if they chose to do so. I hope you will join me in thanking all our faithful staff for their service.

While this decision may be difficult for all of us today, I believe our sacrifices will help to provide for a stronger future for our parish as it partners with our diocese and our Catholic neighbors to continue the mission of forming "dynamic, responsible and service-oriented adult Catholics who participate fully in the sacramental life of the Church and are empowered by their love for God and desire for eternal salvation."

Father Steven Clarke, L.C.
Parochial Administrator
St. Joseph Parish, Harvard