

Hello, I echo everyone's expressions of thanks tonight, but I promised the organizers that I would stay under my 7 minute limit, so I am going to dive right in, and you are not allowed to clap, no matter how exciting the news is, those claps will get me in trouble, but I know how that feels. I saw a second grader in Dodge yesterday, so excited, he just couldn't keep his hand down, because the teacher just explained what an apostrophe 's' is for, she said, "You put an apostrophe 's' on anything you own." And he just couldn't contain himself, until he announced, "Then I'm gonna need a lot of them, cause we own a combine, a horse trailer, a cattle truck, a grain bin,,...." He couldn't wait to get his hands on those apostrophe s's.

And tonight YOU are going to need SO MANY apostrophe 's's as we reflect on so many blessings across our 71 Catholic schools. So instead of clapping, you can picture adding an apostrophe 's, so you can share in "owning" this good news, these are blessings we can all celebrate. Sponsor organizations, these educators we honor tonight along with who they represent, and so many projects and initiatives fueled by "Ignite the Faith" funds. I count the blessings of the superheros in my office, who have a hand in all of this good news, Vickie Kauffold, Betty Arrellanes, Katie Alitz, Greg Monroe, Tracey Kovar, Blair Bonczynski, and Deb Lund.

But I have to stop myself, because I would never keep to my now 6 minutes if I insisted on counting the blessings, for example, of the growth of collaborations with...

Catholic charities, Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, Metro Community College, Creighton University, University of Nebraska, College of St. Mary, the Consulate of Mexico, Boston College's Twin CS program, Notre Dame Alliance for Catholic Education, Boystown, CUES, Winnebago and Omaha Councils, School of Faith, Omaha Police Department, Boy Scouts, public school partners, Office of Evangelization, Development, ...and many more!

That's not even half – I'd have to talk like a school dinner auctioneer to get through them all.

Among our blessings are also collaborations *between* schools:

- Skutt, Roncalli and Gross are teaming up to find points of intersection,
- the Consortium and CUES schools are working together to explore urban school system management practices.
- the greater nebraska grade schools held their first unified Catholic Schools Week Mass with the Archbishop,
- adjacent schools within rural deaneries are in active dialogue about ways to combine resources, staff, and even governance.
- 16 of our grade schools with over 3000 students are now participating in the Blended Learning initiative, an instructional approach that applies technology in a way that increases engagement, achievement, and independent learning.

OK, I am now down to a few minutes to highlight other blessed news from our schools. But what items should I choose?

Sports? How about Roncalli's 9th inning clutch hit to win the state title, or a Marian freshman breaking records and taking medals in track and field? Or the winningest HS football coach in state history at Norfolk Catholic earning another championship? Or, my personal favorite, the Cedar Catholic boys cheering on girl's volleyball by donning choir robes and singing hymns to rattle the opponent.

What about academics? The soon to be released ACT's will again show academic excellence, and our graduation rate last spring was over 99% again, that's become almost common knowledge. But you might not know that while holding those college prep traditions, schools are also expanding non-college options with the help of local Community Colleges. A growing partnership with OPS has brought five new resource teachers to serve more students who struggle. Our high schools have expanded their academic support, guidance and clinical capacity, and elementaries have partnered with Catholic Charities to pair clinicians with elementary students in need.

Overall, we are trying to eliminate that unwanted conversation that ends with, "I'm sorry, we don't have the resources to serve your child," Every year that statement becomes more rare.

What about new and innovative approaches to learning? Did you know St. Stans has a school in it again, after 93 years, and closing in 2013, it now welcomes 80 preschool and kindergarten students, half English speaking and half from Spanish speaking households, learning together in a bi-literate environment. This Dual Language academy is the only one of its kind in Nebraska - Its motto? United

in Christ, Unidos en Cristo. Changes like this demonstrate the ever increasing passion and investment that our Latino parishioners have for Catholic education. This year our high schools will serve 300 latino students, a number never seen before. And it's no wonder they are enrolling, because the ACT score for a Latino student who attends our Catholic schools averages five points higher than a Latino student who does not.

And of course, I must talk about overall enrollment, it's what so many people ask me, it is one of the most common questions I receive. So here are some pretty stunning numbers, every digit of those numbers representing another blessing, a student's life impacted by our Catholic educators.

Last year we graduated a large senior class, only two other senior classes in the last two decades have been larger than 1250. Normally, that would decrease our high school enrollment number - losing that large number of graduates. But over half of our high schools will still be larger this year. For instance, Gross Catholic enrolled more freshman than they have in decades. We also have several elementaries that are bursting at the seams. Sts. Peter and Paul will have more students in it than they have, maybe ever, St. Wenceslaus just added six classrooms and could use six more, Howells is puzzling over where to put a potential Kindergarten class, and in our rural deaneries where county populations are still shrinking, 19 of our 25 elementaries actually grew!

And what about those Millennial parents that statisticians claim aren't attending church or aren't interested in organized religion? I have news for you. Our preschool through Kindergarten

enrollment has increased 33% the last five years, from 2,616 to 3,485. Millennials want something we have, and once they are in the door, we will make sure they encounter Christ, so that they can know and fall in love with our faith.

To summarize, even with a large class graduating out, our total unofficial number of 19,831 is almost the same as last year, but it doesn't tell the good news, that we are growing in all the right places, giving young families an earlier entry, reaching out to a broader array of learners, and providing education for those who previously could not afford it.

And if you ask these teachers and these administrators to brag about enrollment, they rarely will. In fact, when I asked principals to send me news about their schools that would be fun to share tonight, they didn't send counts. They didn't send athletic accomplishments. Instead, this is what I learned:

- last year, more than 20 non-Catholic students or parents entered the Church because of their involvement at school
- 2 school staff members were in discernment
- 4 recent graduates are currently in seminary
- 2 more pursuing other religious vocations
- two Catholic school alumni were just ordained
- a new high school student group that focuses on discernment
- a new campus ministry program inviting high school students into deeper prayer and spiritual growth
- a new encounter program for staff and parents that provides them CEC retreat experiences and facilitates follow up small prayer groups

- young students, unprompted, showing up at a funeral for a school secretary's husband, and perfectly behaved by the way.
- testimonials and quotes from new families like a non-Catholic father saying, "sending my son to Catholic school was the best decision I ever made." and my favorite, a third grader who convinced his parents to send him to St. Rose of Lima because, in his words, "I just need to be there."

My now expired 7 minutes is just the tip of the iceberg, and I am sure we are running out of apostrophe s's, but if I had enough, you'd see them stuck to every one of the people in our school buildings, represented tonight by our award recipients. They are such blessings to our families and our Church, we celebrate their gifts, their sacrifice, and their focus on the important things - making disciples. Fully equipped disciples.

So please take this message with you, visit our re-designed website [Lovemyschool.com](http://Lovemyschool.com) where you can share this good news with others, link to our facebook, twitter and instagram feeds, come work in our buildings, and especially, please keep praying, keep on giving, and start collecting more apostrophe s's, I guarantee we're going to need even more next year.