

What makes a school community great? According to the parking lot gossip, the media, and political machines, the answers can be all over the map and we are left to decide for ourselves and we continue to read and listen to the opinions of others, who may not even be educators.

I offer you some ideas, to ratify that St. Bernadette meets some very significant markers of a great school, not just a good school. I hope it is food for thought and gives you more reasons than ever to be happy with the choice of our school. Great schools in the U. S. and Montgomery County have the following things in common and St. Bernadette's has achieved them all in the last 8 years. Think back, if you were here, what it was like at least 8 years ago or more, and let's take a journey through time:

1. All Great Schools have High Test Scores: We have met Blue Ribbon School criteria every year since 2001. Since 2008, those overall scores have improved by 8.5% measured by stanines. More and more of our kids are qualifying for Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth. Since the inception of Accelerated Reader, our last three years of reading and language scores have improved by 11% measured by stanines.
2. All Great Schools have stable, transparent finances: Even with the last 8 years being effected by large teacher salary increases to justly compensate our faculty, dropping enrollment, increased health care costs and a declining economy, the path we are on is stable and the answers are all open and in front of you when you have the time to look at them. In addition, all great catholic schools have a successful, enjoyable Gala dinner/auction, like ours, which was a beautiful success this last weekend and has been for the last three years.
3. All Great schools balance between high academic standards and the "Race to Nowhere", as depicted in the film by Vicki Abeles". Our catholic high school acceptances have improved every year, and the amount of money awarded to our graduates, as been above \$350,000 total dollars over the 4 years of high school for each of the last 3 graduating classes. We are still waiting for this year's numbers. But so far, the Class of 2011, 34 of the 39 graduates that have been in our school for more than three years applied to Catholic high school. 97% were accepted to a Catholic high school. Currently, they have received approximately \$120,000 in academic scholarships over four years. We still do not know the need based financial aide that they will still be awarded Our kids may be pushed and stretched, but we desire to maintain a balance between homework, extra-curricular activities and academics. In addition, we have made a big investment over the last 8 years in differentiated instruction and addressing all the learning needs of any Catholic learner through our well staffed resource program.

4. All great schools are not “Waiting for Superman”, as depicted in the film by Davis Guggenheim; the Catholic Schools Diocesan offices have a proactive collaborative approach on school improvement from policies to curriculum. The ideas and decisions are on the forefront of what defines good schools. It has been and will always be, in my opinion after 22 years as a teacher and administrator in parochial education and a daughter of a public school educator, that this is the best system of schools in the United States.

5. All great schools include character development in their school climate. We have our faith. In a time where politicians are unkind and rude in the treatment of each other, video games are violent and Lady Gaga has great dance moves, but we are not quite sure about her as a role model for our daughters, we still stand for a particular moral character and disciplined, Christian approach to others. As a community, are we perfect? No. Are we forgiving? We, at least, are taught to try. Are we judgmental? Maybe, but we are taught to treat others as we would want to be treated. Are we strict and consistent? Yes. Our kids are blessed and lucky to learn these tough lessons now, in a loving, Christian discipline system that is consistent when the stakes do not ruin their future. It is a wonderful foundation for our kids and we know that. Even when it is hard and in different school systems kids aren't held accountable, we do not have to be perfect to be good, and neither does our neighbor. Accountability to a higher standard of behavior has never ruined and will never ruin the future of any of our graduates.

6. All great schools have a wonderful faculty and staff. The faculty and staff make all of these things possible and should be applauded for the dedication to Catholic education and the youth of today.

7. All great schools have wonderful community support from a parent volunteer base like all of you. In addition to all of you, who find a way to volunteer your gifts and talents, even though you have busy lives. We have sponsors, donors, gala team members, room mothers and H.S.A leadership and School Advisory Board leadership to thank for all that is done everyday.

So, as we celebrate and enjoy the spring season and the Resurrection, we may be able to think of the positives that change can bring and the blessings of the Catholic schools, even if there are challenges. The sacrifice and work are worth it for more reasons than may be apparent at first glance and during the daily grind of life.