

## SCHOOL PROFILE

### Managing Governance Change in PreK-12 Catholic Schools

## Archdiocese of St. Paul & Minneapolis Ascension Catholic Academy

**T**hrough its mission to support a vital Catholic Church, FADICA strives to catalyze positive change for Catholic schools. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, an average of 120 Catholic schools closed each year. The pandemic led to the closure of more than 200 Catholic schools prior to the fall of 2020.

About 80% of America's Catholic schools are elementary schools. The majority of these schools remain closely linked to a parish community through the "parochial" model for Catholic schools established by the bishops in the late 1800's. The basic tenets of this model – the financial support of the parish and the leadership of the parish pastor – have become scarce resources in the 21st century.

Recognizing that alternative structures for governing Catholic schools are essential for sustainability, FADICA partnered with national leaders in Catholic education to explore evidence-based best practices for Catholic school governance. FADICA's 2020 report, *Managing Governance Change in PreK-12 Catholic Schools* studies innovative governance models in eight dioceses across the country. This narrative provides one example of a Catholic school that has experienced increased stability following the adoption of one of these models.

### Three Minneapolis Catholic schools collaborate to sustain a diverse community

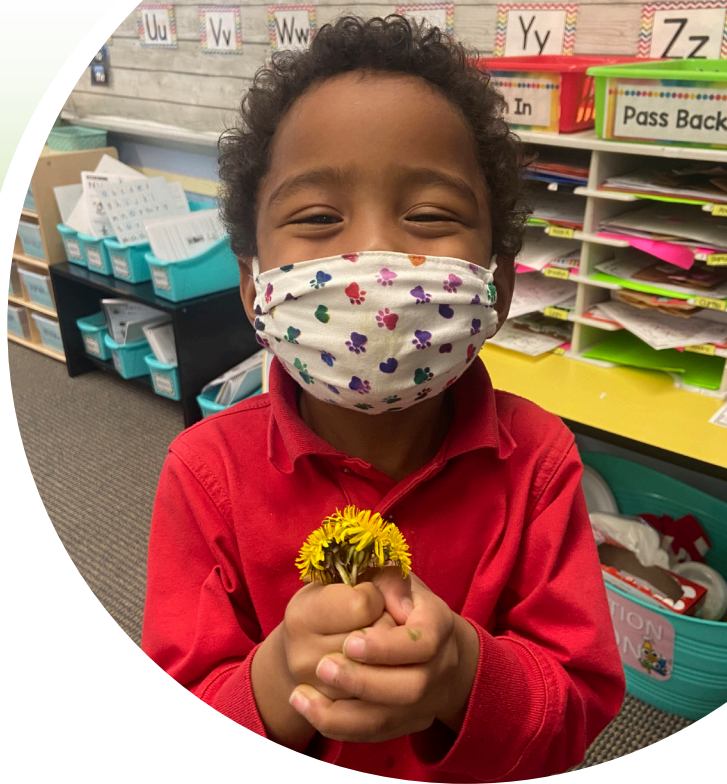
**I**n 2015, a Minnesota pastor joined funders in a dialogue about the future of local, urban, Catholic elementary schools. His parish, the Church of the Ascension, had served its North Minneapolis neighborhood since 1890, and its parish school had once been filled with more than 1,000 students from the Irish Catholic families who had settled there. Despite decades of changing demographics and declining school enrollment, the parish community committed ongoing financial support for Catholic education, and the school continued to thrive.

Another Catholic school, John Paul II, had a much different story. Just two miles northeast of Ascension parish, John Paul II had been formed through a consolidation of eight parish schools. The surrounding neighborhoods that had once housed Irish, French- Canadian and Polish immigrants were currently home to many immigrant families from Ecuador and Mexico.

A little farther east in the Rondo neighborhood of St. Paul, St. Peter Claver School was striving to continue the legacy established in 1950 by the Oblate Sisters of Providence to serve a predominantly Black neighborhood. The school closed for over a decade before reopening in 2001, but the chronic challenges of funding and enrollment remained a threat to its viability.

Educators in all three schools shared a common goal of closing the achievement gap between white students and students of color. The 2019 public high school graduation rate for white students in Minnesota was 88.7%, compared to only 69.9% for Black and Hispanic students, making Minnesota as one of the lowest ranking states in the nation for graduating students of color.<sup>1</sup>

The 2015 dialogue sought to explore an innovative solution to strengthen and sustain all three of the area's urban Catholic schools. While all of the schools had managed similar challenges, it became evident that the parish support for Ascension School had led to a greater position of strength.



## ***An “Anchor Parish” Model***

The innovative solution to strengthen the three urban Catholic schools developed as a result of the collaboration of a visionary pastor, parish administrator and Catholic funders from the GHR Foundation. “The idea started as a means of stewardship,” explained Patricia Stromen, Ascension’s parish administrator since 2001, and current president of the Academy. “Our school had many gifts to share, and wanted to share them with the community.”

When the GHR Foundation asked Ascension parish to consider leveraging their strengths to become an anchor parish for two additional schools, the request received an enthusiastic response.

In the new model, the Church of the Ascension expanded their ministry to include John Paul II and St. Peter Claver schools with their current parish school to form Ascension Catholic Academy. The three schools remain associated with their parishes and facilities where they continue to serve students in their respective neighborhoods.

The system of schools benefits from the strategic guidance of one governing board, and from centralized management provided through an administrative office located at Ascension parish. “We are stronger with three schools than by ourselves, and have grown in ways we never imagined,” said Stromen.

The partnership with the GHR Foundation extended beyond funding to include sharing their expertise in education, and, according to Stromen, “by engaging in relationships with the schools and the Archdiocese. As funders, they took some of the social risk off of us as grantee.”

## ***Leadership and Governance***

Ascension Catholic Academy is guided by a service agreement detailing the responsibilities of the collaborating schools and parishes. The daily oversight and management of the three schools is led by the Academy’s centralized staff, comprised of three executive leadership positions and fifteen staff members, half of which focus primarily on fundraising. All principals, teachers and staff for the three schools are employees of the Academy.

“This was a carefully conceived model developed by knowledgeable, mission-driven people,” shared Father Dale Korogi, Executive Director of the Academy and pastor of the Church of the Ascension. As pastor of the “anchor school,” Korogi is charged with the canonical authority for the Academy, and serves on the board. The parish pastor for St. Peter Claver and the school chaplain for John Paul II also serve as board members.

Korogi shared that he and his priest colleagues had prior experience with alternative governance models and understood the business acumen needed to implement them. “The schools were very challenged, so the benefits of being part of a collegial effort far outweighed any other concerns,” he explained.

The Academy is governed by a board of limited jurisdiction comprised of fourteen lay men and women in addition to the three pastors. FADICA’s report categorizes this type of governance as “local-collegial,” defined by the decision-making of a board with partial or full executive authority over the strategies and policies for one school. Schools that transition to a local-collegial style of governance from the traditional governance model utilized by most parochial schools have benefitted from the added expertise and financial support of board members, as well as an increase in overall community involvement. The integration of a decision-making board has also been proven to provide greater continuity during a time of leadership transitions for a school, which mitigates the disruptions often experienced through personnel changes in the pastor or principal role.

Barry Lieske, an Academy board member and former president of a local Catholic high school, noted that the initial members of the board did not have deep experience with governance. However, their willingness to serve on the board was driven by a deep passion for Catholic education, and a commitment to serving marginalized children. With many of the area’s parishes in “survival mode,” Lieske noted that the group shared the concern that, “if we don’t do something now, we could lose the whole experience” for generations to come.

While the implementation of this alternative model of governance has not been without challenges, Lieske acknowledges that the support of the archbishop and the diocese has been beneficial. He credited the pastors

for the success of the model, stating that they were “supportive but not demanding, and empowered the board to share in the role of leading the schools. Pastors were leaning in, inviting us to roll up our sleeves and do this together.”

Lieske noted that he and his colleagues on the board recognize that the cost of a Catholic education today is vastly different from the 60’s and 70’s when the religious orders supported the schools. “Many of us, as beneficiaries of Catholic education, are willing to step up and give back.”

## ***Finances***

Stromen shared that their ability to serve their scholars is directly tied to the generosity of their donors, who she refers to as “partners in ministry” because of their commitment to supporting Catholic education in the urban core. In fact, 90% of the school’s \$6 million operating budget is contributed through charitable gifts from individual donors, partner parishes and foundations. Only 2% of the academy’s revenue is earned through tuition and fees.

“The resources we have invested in fundraising and development are key to the school’s revenue,” shared Lieske. He and the other board members understand that most of Ascension’s students and families do not have the resources to cover the costs of tuition, but also realize the opportunity Ascension provides. “The options available to the urban core are meager,” Lieske explained. “Our story is profound. We are changing lives on the fundamental level of faith. People are willing to step up and offer support when that story unfolds.”

## ***Mission fulfillment***

“Our motto is ‘every child, every day,’” said Stromen. “We strive to serve the whole child,” she said. To meet that goal, the Academy shifted expectations of the staff, teachers and students, which included the practice of addressing their students as “scholars” to lift academic and behavioral expectations.

Stromen explained how the school’s administration demonstrated their commitment to equity by asking,



**“This model allows me and my fellow priests to be pastors to the scholars, not administrators.”**

**– Rev. Dale Korogi, pastor**

“how do we shift the conditions for learning?” In response, the Academy partnered with community agencies for student support services to enhance social-emotional learning and to prevent barriers to learning caused by issues related to poverty, homelessness, incarceration and other crises.

The Covid-19 pandemic placed additional strain on the Academy’s ability to serve the whole child, and uncovered new challenges as scholars tried to manage distance learning with limited technology tools and access. The Academy worked with each family to ensure that scholars had laptops and internet access, as well as other basic needs. “We were constantly calling families to ask: ‘Did they have food? Were they safe? Did they have wi-fi access?’” said Stromen.

The spring of 2020 brought tremendous trauma to the scholars and families with the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis and the unrest that spread throughout the city and the nation. Stromen recalled that “We asked ourselves, how do we honor the trauma and reality of our scholars, while continuing to offer and expect high performance and growth in faith?”

“The ability to be present as a pastor with the young people in the community during this time was an enormous blessing,” shared Korogi. “This model allows





## Ascension Catholic Academy

### Anchor Parish Model

- 3 Schools as Ministry of 1 Parish
- Local-Collegial Governance
- Board of Limited Jurisdiction

me and my fellow priests to be pastors to the scholars, not administrators.”

The dedication of the Academy’s leadership and board has led to positive student outcomes. Academy scholars enter high school well prepared, and 100% graduate from high school. In Minnesota where the high school graduation rates for Hispanic and Black students are 69%, this is transformational.

“We are changing the trajectory of our scholars’ lives,” said Lieske. “They are life-long beneficiaries of Catholic education, and will go on to become leaders with great potential for the benefit of society.”

### ***Best practices in action***

As a native of the Archdiocese, Father Korogi is deeply connected to the community and expressed appreciation for the collaboration he enjoys with the other pastors. He acknowledged that “some priests have the tendency to want to do things themselves, and may not appreciate

challenges to their authority.” He explained that in the case of the academy, the collaborative relationship shared by the pastors has been aided by the pastors’ prior experience with alternative governance models, and their understanding of business acumen needed to operate a school.

The support that Ascension Catholic Academy receives from the three parish pastors exemplifies one of the best practices highlighted in FADICA’s report related to the role of the pastor. The research revealed that successful transitions were commonly attributed to maintaining collaborative relationships among pastors and schools as well as clearly defined roles and responsibilities for the associated priests.

Another best practice identified in FADICA’s report was for Catholic school leaders to “emphasize mission over money,” noting that it is a common misperception that a change in governance may lead to cost-savings. Although some economies of scale or increased efficiencies may be realized in cases of school consolidations, the report cautions that the rationale for governance change should focus more on enhanced capacity for mission fulfillment through evangelization and academic excellence.

By combining three urban Catholic schools under the umbrella of one parish ministry, Ascension Catholic Academy has provided a mission-driven model for sustaining Catholic education within economically-challenged communities. “I believe our story can impact other urban Catholic schools,” shared Stromen.

“We are allowing this to be a spirit-driven ministry,” remarked Korogi. “In all of our planning and strategizing, we keep calling ourselves back to mission, to what the Gospel calls us to do.” Korogi noted that faith, justice and equity can be achieved by providing excellent faith-based education. “This sounds so simple, but it can get off track,” Korogi added. “Mission is at the heart of our work and that’s what animates us.” ❧

1. Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2017-18 Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate

This profile was produced as a complement to FADICA’s report, *Managing Governance Change in PreK-12 Catholic Schools*, which may be accessed at: [www.fadica.org](http://www.fadica.org).