

Catholic schools making the grade, report shows

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Many families choose to enroll their children in Catholic schools for religious reasons, but educators say kids also get academic benefits.

The Green Bay Area Catholic Education system for the first time compared test scores from 10 local Catholic schools with scores from area public schools. Catholic educators say the comparison showed students at the parochial schools are generally more proficient or advanced in math, reading and language arts than their peers at public schools.

Catholic school advocates say the scores highlight the strong quality of education at those schools at a time when they're working hard to attract students. That effort ramps up this week, which is National Catholic Schools Week.

GRACE president Carol Conway-Gerhardt said bringing together 10 local Catholic schools into one system allowed administrators to compare test scores from those students with those at public schools.

GRACE compared results from the 2009 Measure of Academic Progress assessments given at parochial schools with the Wisconsin Knowledge and Content Exam scores for public school students in the Cooperative Educational Service Agency 7 area and the state of Wisconsin. CESA 7 is an educational agency that serves 37 school districts in Northeastern Wisconsin.

Though the tests are different, GRACE officials used a correlation system supplied by test companies.

GRACE said 96 percent of fourth-graders who were tested were proficient in language arts, compared with 80 percent of fourth-graders in CESA 7 and 77 percent in the state. It also found 97 percent of fourth-graders were proficient or advanced in reading, compared with 83 percent in CESA 7 and 81 percent in the state. In math, 88 percent of GRACE fourth-graders were proficient or advanced, compared with 85 percent in CESA 7 and 81 percent statewide.

Numbers were similar for eighth-graders.

GRACE said 94 percent of eighth-graders were proficient or advanced in language arts, compared with 71 percent in CESA 7 and 65 percent in Wisconsin. They also said 99 percent of GRACE eighth-graders were proficient or advanced in reading, compared with 87 percent for CESA 7 and 84 percent in the state.

The study said 95 percent of eighth-graders in GRACE were proficient or advanced in math, compared with 85 percent in CESA 7 and 78 percent statewide.

Students at public schools may make up a different demographic than those who attend private or charter schools, said Brenden Whitfield, assessment coordinator for the Green Bay School District.

"We have the influx of students with English language barriers, high poverty and disabilities that must be taken into consideration," he said.

Whitfield also noted the assessment program the Catholic schools used differs from WKCE. MAPS is an adaptive assessment in which questions are made easier or more difficult based on a child's ability, while WKCE is a grade-level assessment. However, Conway-Gerhardt noted that GRACE used a comparison system provided by test companies.



Seventh-grade student Riley Bell takes a quiz using SMART board technology Thursday in algebra class at Holy Cross School, 3002 Bay Settlement Road in the town of Scott. (H. Marc Larson/Press-Gazette)



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The system

GRACE is the largest Catholic school system in Wisconsin. It was formed in 2008 with the goal of providing affordable Catholic early childhood, elementary and middle-school education, Conway-Gerhardt said. It will assume full operation of the schools on July 1.

She said the purpose of comparing test scores wasn't to put down public schools.

"We have fine public schools in the Green Bay area," she said. "But we wanted to assure all of our current students and families they're receiving a great education. We also wanted to attract more people to our schools. We really believe we offer a strong education while students learn in their faith and grow in faith.

"We've always struggled a little bit with how to get a sense of how are students are doing, this helps us to (do) that."

Compiling test scores also allows schools to focus on struggling students.

"Individual schools made plans about how they were going to improve and will review them to see if they had successful interventions," Conway-Gerhardt said.

The positive test scores also serve as a marketing tool for schools that may have to work harder to attract students.

"The current economy really is challenging private education in general," acknowledged Robin Jensen, principal at Holy Cross School, a Catholic elementary school. "It can be harder for parents to justify the cost, or they may not be able to afford it. We offer subsidies to help families who need it, but it is a cost."

Tuition for GRACE schools is \$2,000 a year, plus a \$60 registration fee. Families who don't belong to one of the 23 parishes that are part of GRACE pay more. Tuition at Green Bay Notre Dame Academy is \$4,700 a year. Tuition help is available through GRACE and the schools as well.

"We try to make it accessible for anyone who wants to attend," Conway-Gerhardt said.

Schools no longer can expect families will send children to a Catholic school just because it is a church school, leaders agree.

"I think we've done more marketing in the past three or five years than before," Jensen said. "Families want to know their kids are getting a good education. And we do offer that."

Enrollment at GRACE schools for kindergarten through eighth grade dipped slightly for the 2010-11 school year from 2,233 last school year to 2,195, Conway-Gerhardt said. More than 650 students have signed up for classes in the first few days of online enrollment for the school year that starts in the fall, which she said indicates interest is stable or growing.

Notre Dame Academy has 740 students, a number that's held consistent for the past five years, principal John Ravizza said. Ninety-seven percent of its 2010 graduates went on to attend a four-year college, he said.

"We think that provides evidence that students learning here are well-prepared," he said.

About 2.1 million students attended Catholic elementary and secondary schools nationwide in 2009-10, according to the National Catholic Educational Association. There were about 7,000 Catholic schools in the U.S. Last school year, 24 new Catholic schools opened and 174 consolidated or closed, the association said.

Schools work to keep programming and technology competitive with public schools' offerings, Conway-Gerhardt said.



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Some schools have wireless Internet availability, and most classrooms have SMART boards, or interactive white boards, laptops and other computers available for students.

"We do have a technology work group that meets monthly," Conway-Gerhardt said. "We established a technology vision on Jan. 11 and plan to hire an (information technology) person.

"Overall, people would be amazed at how many computers, laptops and SMART boards we have in schools. We recognize the importance of technology in education."

Values and education

Kate Meeuwssen said she and her husband chose to send their daughter, now in third grade, to Holy Cross School because they wanted her raised in a school that promotes faith.

"We really wanted that family feeling," she said. "When I see that school, it's a busy school, it's a bustling school, where kids work hard, play hard and pray hard.

"We have very good public schools in this area, but we really wanted a school where they teach values and the faith."

Parent Debbie Hendry agreed. Her daughter Samantha attends 4-year-old kindergarten at Holy Cross.

"We like the fact that God is part of her education," Hendry said. "And the hugs and attention she gets are great. You tend to know all the teachers and staff who work at the school, and they know you. I like that."

Educators say they feel the same.

"We're forming adults, people who will be the future of our world," Holy Cross' Jensen said. ""We want kids to recognize what is right and wrong, what they can do to make a better world.

"We try very hard to infuse the Catholic faith, the values and morals into everything we teach. I don't think you can put a price on that."