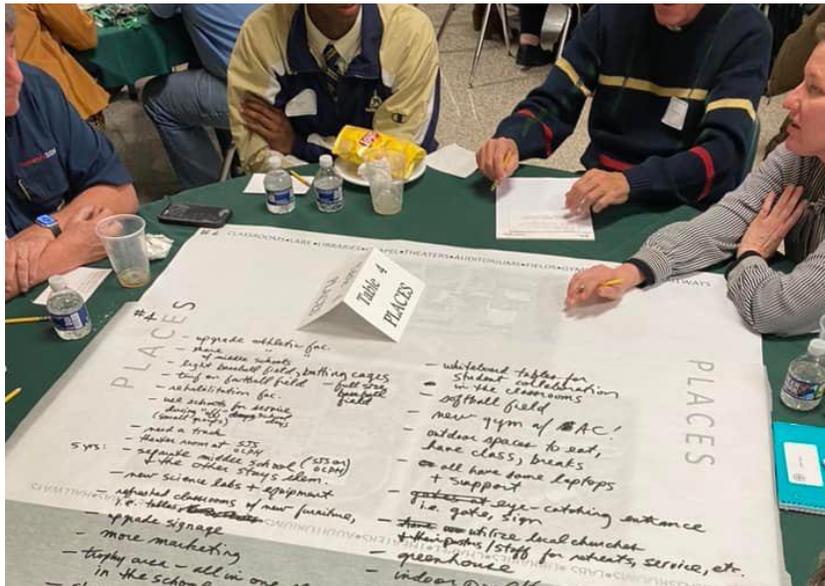


# Chattanooga Area Catholic Schools



## Vision Charrette Report November 2021



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## Executive Summary

On November 17, 2021, students, faculty, administrators, parents and alumni of Notre Dame High, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, and St. Jude Schools convened in a facilitated three-hour planning charrette to envision the future of the Chattanooga Area Catholic Schools. In all, 167 individuals participated, including nine priests from the Chattanooga Deanery.

The event was facilitated by Jim Kennedy, who has led numerous public planning meetings over the past three decades.

Although Bishop Richard Stika was unable to attend the event in person, he welcomed the crowd with taped remarks, emphasizing that the evening’s conversations would be pivotal to the schools’ future, and urging participants to “think outside the box.” Diocesan School Superintendent, Dr. Sedonna Prater, offered introductory remarks, highlighting the considerable successes the three schools had enjoyed during the past year.

Mr. Kennedy previewed the process the group would follow and shared some of the comments he had received during previous interviews with various school stakeholders:

*“The general idea of a charrette is to create an innovative atmosphere in which a diverse group of stakeholders can collaborate to generate visions for the future.”*

Rob Roggema  
Landscape Architect



Among the interviewees, there was shared passion for the local schools. For some it was the alumni connection, for others it was parental pride. In some cases, it was both. Teachers and administrators conveyed a similar love for their schools and expressed deep pride in the programs they were delivering to their students. They are fiercely proud of their students' preparedness and believe the local Catholic schools accomplish that as well as any schools in the area. Magnifying this sense of pride, perhaps, is the belief that Catholic schools are delivering excellence on a playing field that is anything but level, as Chattanooga's other private schools – faith based and not – have far better facilities and the resources to upgrade and maintain them. More than a few interviewees spoke of “curb appeal,” wishing that the Catholic schools had more of it.

Many interviewees consider the education of the diocese's Catholic youth to be a fundamental mission of the Church. In that sense, it was not a question of *whether* we sustain Catholic schools in Chattanooga, but *how* we guarantee their viability.



There is also a widely embraced view that a Catholic education anchors students in a way that other schools cannot. It goes beyond “teaching the whole child” – it is also about an enlarged world view and a fundamental grounding in the Gospel that other schools do not deliver, faith-based or not.



On the other hand, people were divided on whether the schools are “too Catholic” or “not Catholic enough,” but their definitions differ on what “Catholic” means in the school context. Obviously, if “Catholic education” is a differentiator from other schools, presenting the concept to prospective families in a cogent and consistent manner will be of paramount importance.

Regardless, the lay interviewees expressed strong hope that the parish clergy would be firm and unfailing in promoting the Catholic schools to their parishioners, and that sentiment would be echoed during the charrette.

Interviewees shared their frustration that the schools lack budgets and advancement professionals to adequately market the outstanding work being done, and several cited it as the most significant challenge facing the local Catholic schools. The voting results from the charrette reflected this concern; ideas relating to advancement and fundraising generated more votes than any other issue.

At the same time, interviewees fully accepted the premise that you can’t be funding advancement teams when so many of your classroom teachers are under-compensated. This awareness also spilled over into the charrette, where topics centered on teacher pay and benefits, such as tuition remission and professional development, garnered the second-highest number of votes.

Not all the interviewees knew the magnitude of the debt situation, but the consensus certainly was that the institutional debt would have to be addressed if any long-term visions were to be successfully implemented.



To that end, there was a surprising level of optimism that resources exist among the Chattanooga Catholic school alumni (as well as other philanthropic resources) to fund a visionary plan, although interviewees were less sanguine about finding prospects willing to fund the debt.

The physical distance between Knoxville and Chattanooga does not help matters. It was an oft-repeated theme that Chattanooga Catholic schools do not receive the care and attention that they should from the diocesan offices. To that point, several interviewees commented on the physical condition of the Chattanooga schools compared to Knox Catholic. Moreover, many are aware that this latest strategic planning effort comes in the wake of previous efforts that failed to produce tangible results, so they are skeptical (and some, cynical) about this latest foray into planning for the future.

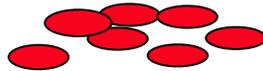
That skepticism notwithstanding, there was a buzz of excitement and optimism in the Notre Dame gym on November 17. Charrettes are designed, after all, to give people a glimpse of the possible, and 25 tables of people gathered in a high school cafeteria can generate a lot of contagious positive energy. In that respect, the charrette can be a powerful launch to this new planning process, but leadership needs to sustain the momentum.

It is important to remember that a one-night vision charrette is just that: a launch. It does *not* constitute a strategic plan, nor is it intended to be a statistically reliable reflection of what the greater community thinks about or hopes for the future of Catholic education. Rather, it is intended to be a first step, compiling a prioritized set of ideas that 167 participants felt could positively influence the arc of Catholic education in Chattanooga.



Before turning the participants loose to do their work, the facilitator quoted Pope Francis from his opening charge to the Vatican’s two-year Synod on Synodality: “Every encounter calls for openness, courage and a willingness to let ourselves be challenged by the presence and stories of others. Let us have a good journey together. May we be pilgrims in love with the Gospel and open to the surprises of the Spirit.”

## Process



The vision charrette took place in the Notre Dame High School cafeteria and was organized around one question:

**What can Chattanooga Area Catholic Schools do over the course of the next five years to achieve and sustain excellence in terms of *people, places and programs*?**

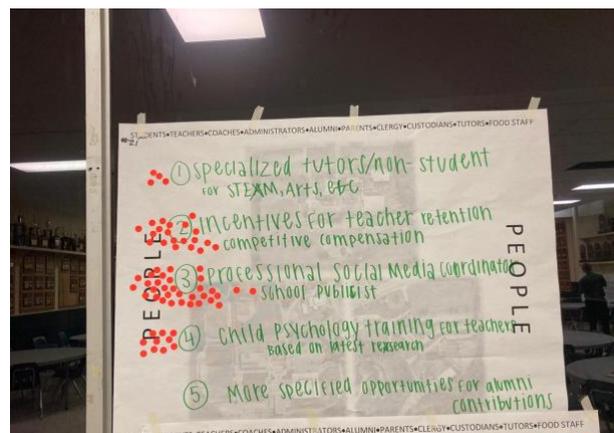
Each one of 25 table groups then addressed one of the three areas (people, places, programs). Eight tables each were assigned to *people* and *places*, and nine tables tackled *places*.

After taking a moment to write their ideas on cards, the groups then recorded those suggestions on a large piece of tracing paper. In all, the tables generated 859 individual ideas (although some of those suggestions were duplicated at other tables).

When all the ideas had been recorded, the members of the table group voted to determine their table’s top five ideas, which were then transcribed onto the table’s master sheet.

Next, spokespersons from each table stood and presented their group’s five ideas. Again, there was some redundancy as the later tables took the

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floor, but after all 25 tables had presented, the sheets were posted around the perimeter of the cafeteria. Each participant was then given six round stickers and instructed to place one (or more) next to the ideas they found most visionary, aspirational, transformative, compelling, etc. By the end of the night, 992 stickers adorned the 25 sheets.

The appendix of this report contains all the input from the evening, presented:

- 1) As verbatim responses from the table groups (tissue paper entries), sorted by topic,
- 2) As prioritized into top five ideas by table group, and
- 3) As ranked ideas based upon votes by all participants
- 4) As top ideas aggregated by theme and vote

In assessing the support indicated by the votes, one should remember that each participant was given only six stickers to distribute across 110 separate (though not always distinct) ideas. In that respect, any individual idea earning more than, say, 40 votes is probably an idea to be carefully considered as planning groups are assembled to advance the strategic plan.





## Vision Report

There are different ways to slice the data generated at this visioning event. Because there were so many ideas generated, the input seems scattered until it is aggregated. If we consider the base universe of the data to be the 992 votes cast, then we can look at aggregated areas of interest as percentages of that whole.

In reviewing the meeting output, the facilitator made a subjective decision to sort the ideas 26 thematic areas:

1. Advancement
2. Arts
3. Athletic Facilities
4. Beautification & Signage
5. Business Mentorships & Internships
6. Community Oversight
7. Cafeteria & Food
8. Catholic Identity
9. Co-Curricular
10. College Prep
11. Diversity, Equity & Inclusion
12. Environment & Outdoor Education
13. Enrollment
14. Faculty Compensation & Professional Development
15. General Upgrade & Maintenance
16. Handicapped Access
17. Leadership Development
18. Languages
19. Middle School
20. Miscellaneous
21. STEM/STEAM
22. Student Support
23. Technology
24. Tuition & Financial Aid
25. Unified Campus
26. Vocational/Trade Education

Once the final vote tally was allocated across the thematic areas, they ranked as follows, based on the number of votes cast for each:

- |                                  |                                     |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Advancement (125)             | 13. Vocational/Trade Education (24) |
| 2. Athletic Facilities (107)     | 14. Business Mentorships &          |
| 3. Faculty Compensation &        | Internships (22)                    |
| Professional Development (105)   | 15. Middle School (22)              |
| 4. Catholic Identity (97)        | 16. Miscellaneous (15)              |
| 5. General Upgrade & Maintenance | 17. Arts (13)                       |
| (87)                             | 18. Languages (12)                  |
| 6. Beautification & Signage (82) | 19. STEM/STEAM (12)                 |
| 7. Diversity, Equity & Inclusion | 20. Community Oversight (10)        |
| (72)                             | 21. Co-Curricular (8)               |
| 8. Student Support (40)          | 22. Leadership Development (6)      |
| 9. Unified Campus (37)           | 23. Tuition & Financial Aid (4)     |
| 10. Environment & Outdoor        | 24. College Prep (3)                |
| Education (31)                   | 25. Enrollment (2)                  |
| 11. Cafeteria/Food (28)          | 26. Technology (2)                  |
| 12. Handicapped Access (26)      |                                     |

A few disclaimers about the results: it should be noted that in recapping his pre-charrette interviews, Mr. Kennedy drew attention to curb appeal, fundraising, institutional debt, and competition. And in Bishop Stika's opening remarks, he made specific mention of the middle school. These references probably heightened awareness of these topics and influenced the discussions around the tables. Also, many schoolteachers and administrators were in the room, and this would have an understandable impact on topics relating to faculty compensation and benefits. The single-biggest vote getter was an item listed as "Bishop Barron Speaker Circuit Program - once a year fundraiser - It's a Wonderful Life/George Bailey." In all likelihood, this outcome was driven, in part, by a very emotional presentation by a schoolteacher who repeated that this was all about "money, we need money, where will the money come from?" She then cited "It's a Wonderful Life" and the climactic scene where George Bailey's friends descend on his home with vast



amounts of cash to help him out of his financial straits. This allegory, although powerful and romantic, is not the kind of sustainable solution that the Chattanooga Area Catholic Schools need as they look to the future.

Taken together, issues associated with institutional advancement, i.e. the promotion and fundraising necessary to guarantee the schools' viability, attracted just over 12% of the stickers. This echoed what the pre-charrette interviewees understood – that it takes money to raise money, and that investments should be made in people and programs that help generate enrollment while nurturing relationships with alumni and parishes across the deanery and beyond. Their optimism that there are untapped resources is tempered by the reality that it takes people and marketing budgets to tap them.

Close behind advancement issues came athletic facilities, with just under 12% of the stickers. Driven in part by the aforementioned competitive awareness, Catholic school families know that gyms without air conditioning and fields without bleachers place schools at a disadvantage when viewed through the eyes of an aspiring student athlete. Since they were encouraged “to think outside the box” and beyond pragmatic budgetary constraints, participants envisioned improvements that ranged from pools and stadium lights to state-of-the-art overhauls of athletic facilities at all three schools.

As previously noted, the charrette participants gave a lot of attention to the issues of faculty compensation and benefits, specifically professional development and tuition remission. Folks know that the success of the schools rides on the shoulders of its classroom teachers and coaches, and they want to compensate the system's great teachers at levels that will make them less susceptible to offers from other schools.



Charrette participants place high value on Catholic identity, reflected in their desire to see more religious in the hallways and the classrooms. They also expressed an interest in imbuing the importance of Catholic education through pastoral messages from the pulpit and inclusion in marriage encounter programs. It has already been said that “Catholic” is the main point of difference for St. Jude, OLPH and Notre Dame. Quantifying that and conveying it will be fundamental to their future success.

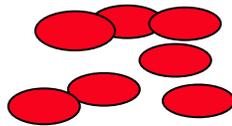
The general upkeep and appearance of the schools matters a lot. Charrette participants gave high priority to taking care of, and in some cases, upgrading, the facilities that already exist. If one chose to combine that idea with the next theme – beautification and signage – it would catapult to the top of the vision list. Clearly, people believe there is much to be done with the existing buildings and grounds, regardless of whether the community decides to tackle any major capital improvements, of which there was no shortage on the vision list, including field lighting, turf installation, bleachers, swimming pool, fieldhouse, and a climbing wall.

Chattanooga is in the enviable position of growing its population. The mix is diverse – millennials seeking the quality of life and the promise of startup opportunity, and the Hispanic and Latino community that has been growing for more than a decade. The charrette participants – as the interviewees before them – embraced the Catholic mission of welcoming children of all backgrounds into the local school system. Unfortunately, many of these families cannot afford the tuition, so it becomes yet another issue for the balance sheet – funding the endowment sufficiently to make a Catholic school education attainable. It may be worth noting that the local Catholic schools have an historic advantage in terms of



their commitment to enrolling a diverse student population, but it comes with a cost, and it should be part of the discussion moving forward.

From the 72 votes that were cast for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, there is a 32-vote drop to the next theme area: Student Support; and there is a very steady decrease in votes for the ideas that run from there. However, because this is not a scientific survey of a large population, these remaining ideas should not be regarded as less significant. The fact that they made it to the discussion at all indicates that some subset of the market cares about these issues, and advocacy for them may grow as the planning process moves forward.





## Recommendations

As the diocesan leadership charts its future planning path and contemplates the planning groups who will help shape it, they should pay attention to:

**Advancement Capacity** – Indeed, the future is very much about money – identifying it, raising it, and sustaining it. This cannot be done effectively by adding the development role to administrators who have other jobs to do. The notion of a deanery-wide fundraising professional is worth discussing.

**Teacher Compensation** – Money aside, the day-to-day success of any school rests with the quality of its teachers. That means their happiness and sense of fulfillment, but it also means, in many cases, providing for their families as best they can. Several people repeated anecdote about a beloved Notre Dame teacher/coach who was recently wooed away by another private school that was able to provide a better compensation package.

**Parish support** – If the parish priests won't support the local schools by touting the value of Catholic education, people wonder who will. Admittedly, the schools need to build sturdier bridges between themselves and the parishes, but their hope is that the clergy will meet them halfway.

**Image and Appeal** – Like it or not, the Catholic schools are in a race for talent. They can wage that battle by improving the first impression they present to their prospects, but they must also create an appealing message that helps families understand why a Catholic education will fundamentally help their sons and daughters develop stronger character while preparing them for college and the world beyond.



## Conclusion

The Catholic Schools planning charrette revealed a deep passion for Catholic education among the people who participated. At the end of the evening, the facilitator told one attendee that he felt “we were blowing on coals.” The challenge will be to keep the fire burning, but any fire fades with time and inattention. Diocesan leaders need to launch into their work with Meitler, identify planning groups around matters that can generate excitement and support and, potentially, solidify the course of Catholic education in Chattanooga. Clearly, this is a significant opportunity to make that happen and to capture the imaginations of people who care about the future of Catholic schools and can help to sustain it.

