Despite huge educational challenges created by COVID-19, Principal Bridget Kramer hasn’t allowed it to slow down efforts to create an environment where all students can reach their full potential. This year Community of Saints (COS) has kept the momentum going with rigorous new curriculums in science and math, while also expanding City Connects, a program that addresses obstacles to learning that occur outside of the classroom.

Curriculums Designed to Accelerate Learning

In selecting new curriculums, a top priority was ensuring there was plenty of rigor, and that all students would have access to above grade-level concepts. “In education, there’s a tendency to shortchange students of color by making assumptions that limit their potential, or putting them in a bubble as a way of protecting them from failing,” said Principal Kramer. “We want to ensure that all students are exposed to high-quality, grade-level content that aligns with grade level standards. We also want to provide access to higher level concepts so students can build the skills they need to accelerate learning.”

For science, the COS team working on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) partnered with the University of Notre Dame to select and implement a curriculum that is student-led, hands-on, and addresses real-world problems.
Dear Alums & Friends & Families of COS,

It is a common family experience, if one member of the family is in trouble, the others will put aside what they are doing and come to the aid of the troubled family member. When there is one student in the classroom who is having difficulty, the teacher will give a little more attention to that student.

These familiar occurrences describe what the Scripture tells us about God. While God loves all people, God has a special concern for those who are suffering, those in need, those forgotten and dismissed by others. In theological language we call that “God's preferential option for the poor.”

In the Gospel, Jesus seeks out such people; he befriends them, spends time with them, and eats with them. He instructs his disciples to follow his example.

Many COS families struggle with financial issues, sometimes with health issues, and often employment issues. COS will never turn away any students for financial reasons. While we hold each student as unique and entitled to a first-class Catholic education, we nonetheless have a preferential option for those most in need, for families who struggle greatly to hold it all together.

All of this does not happen automatically. Since the 2007-08 school year you, Alums & Friends & Families have raised more than $2,800,000 to underwrite tuition assistance for literally hundreds of students. Every family pays at least some of the tuition cost. For some families even a small amount is a stretch. Your generosity comes to the rescue, making it possible for every student to receive a high-quality Catholic education.

Without you the mission of COS could not occur; you make it happen.

As we celebrate the season of Thanksgiving, it is only right that you be thanked for all you do for COS families. The student Thanksgiving Mass gives thanks for you and your generous spirit.

Thank you.
Fr. Steve Adrian, Canonical Administrator of COS

MESSAGE FROM father steve

Dear Alums & Friends & Families of COS,

The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis named Community of Saints (COS) a Drexel Mission School, one of ten in the Twin Cities. The initiative recognizes Catholic elementary schools serving low-income families and students of color for a dual challenge; the schools have limited ability to generate revenue from tuition while shouldering the extra costs of providing additional services crucial to students’ success.

Named for St. Katharine Drexel, patron saint of philanthropy and racial justice, qualifying schools must have a minimum enrollment of 100 students with 50% or more students of color and at least 50% qualifying for free or reduced lunch, a standard indicator for low-income households. COS has more than 200 students, with 61% qualifying for free and reduced lunch, one of the highest rates for Catholic schools in the archdiocese.

Participating schools must commit to standards of excellence in education in exchange for assistance that includes access to scholarships and a City Connects Coordinator (see cover story for more information about City Connects). The initiative is supported by the GHR Foundation, the Aim Higher Foundation, and the Catholic Community Foundation of Minnesota.

DOUBLE YOUR GIFT!

For the month of December, all gifts will be matched dollar for dollar (up to $7,500) thanks to the generous support of an alum and good friend of COS.

Call Doug Lieser at 651-457-2510 for more information.
students doing more experiments and having more conversations about “why” and “how.”

“We recently learned about bio-mimicry where humans use nature to solve problems,” explained first grade teacher, Alex Rumpel. “We started by looking at different animals, studying their body parts, and learning what each part does. Then students came up with their own ideas for bio-mimicry and had to build it.”

**Breakthrough Achievements**

Last year COS received a grant from the GHR Foundation to partner with the non-profit, Achievement Net (ANET), to research and select a math curriculum. ANET helps schools achieve breakthrough results and is dedicated to expanding educational equity for all students. Last spring, a committee made up of COS teachers and Principal Kramer began meeting with ANET monthly to establish criteria and vet options.

Principal Kramer says the new curriculum checks all the boxes. “It works with STEM, and the way we use technology,” she said. “The photos of kids look like our kids, and they’re solving problems kids might encounter in real life. We don’t want students saying ‘I’ll never use this.’”

Third grade teacher Amy Brown appreciates the ongoing training to help teachers master the many tools the curriculum provides. “These curriculums were created for the world we live in now and take advantage of the way we can use technology in the classroom today,” Brown said. “We can do things now that weren’t remotely possible five or ten years ago.”

**Removing Barriers to Academic Success**

City Connects, a program that connects families to services, was developed by Boston University 25 years ago with the premise that meeting a child’s needs outside the classroom improves academic achievement. Since then, the program has racked up impressive statistics proving it works. In 2015, the GHR Foundation successfully piloted the program in the Twin Cities. Now the archdiocese’s Drexel Mission Schools Initiative includes funding for a City Connects coordinator in each of the mission schools, including COS. (See page 2 for details.)

City Connects coordinator at COS, Chris Benefield, had been at the school two days per week, but due to growing enrollment, he’s now full time. “Literally, nothing is out of bounds,” said Benefield, describing the ways he helps families. Early in the pandemic, Benefield spent a lot of time finding WiFi services for families so students could participate in remote learning. He’s helped children get scholarships for summer programs in fashion design and creative writing, and scored free tickets for families to attend concerts or ballets. He’s arranged to have bags of food available on Fridays for households who might not have enough for the weekend, and as pandemic housing protections fall away, he tracks down rent support and housing options.

“When a child’s out of school needs are met, they’re more ready to learn,” stated Benefield. “We’re trying to directly impact academics with interventions that close the achievement gap.”

**Opening Doors to Success**

Principal Kramer points out there can be hundreds of reasons why low-income students don’t have the same opportunities to succeed as students from higher-income families. Removing obstacles and opening doors, whether it’s inside or outside the classroom, makes a difference. “COS is committed to helping students be the best version of themselves,” said Principal Kramer. “This is a place where we really believe every child is made in the image of God’s love.”
What’s New with COS Faculty?

Meet some of the teachers who are new this year, who are returning this year, and who decided it was time for a change.

ALEX RUMPEL began teaching at COS in 2015, left in 2018 to join her husband, a professional hockey player who signed with a team in Europe, then returned in 2020 to teach the expanded kindergarten class. From the start she was drawn to COS for its policy of not turning families away because of tuition. “I really liked the mission and the idea that the school would never deny a student an education because of money,” she said. “That told me there was a true commitment to these kids.”

This year, as the large kindergarten class ascends to first grade, Rumpel is making the move with them. Her class is a mix, with some students she taught last year, some she didn’t, and some new to the school. She reports they’ve hit the ground running. “I already know where a lot of them are academically and what works for them,” she said. “That gives us a head start.”

Rumpel, who grew up in Rosemount, graduated from Cretin-Derham Hall High School and earned her teaching degree from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She has taught school for seven years and is happy to be back at COS. “I know first hand how the teachers and principal go above and beyond to help these kids succeed. It’s really a special place.”

What she loves most about teaching are the light bulb moments. “You can see on kids’ faces when something is hard, and they’re frustrated, and then — BOOM — it clicks!” she exclaimed. “It’s so fulfilling. I don’t think other jobs offer anything to compare.”

EVA BONCICH brings energy, enthusiasm, and a valuable perspective to her second grade classroom. Like many of her students, Boncich was an English Language Learner (ELL) who only spoke Spanish when she started first grade at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in Hastings, MN, “It was a small school, and aside from me there was one other girl of color,” Boncich remembers. “Teaching at COS gives me a chance to make sure the classroom is a comfortable place for kids who share that experience.”

After moving to St. Paul, Boncich attended Cretin-Derham Hall High School, which led her to pursue a career in teaching. “I didn’t always love school, but I always wanted to go to school because of my teachers,” she said. “For college, I wanted to find the best place to go for a teaching degree.”

After graduating from the College of St. Benedict last spring, Boncich put her bilingual skills to work in the classroom at COS and is excited to be at a school where she can share her Catholic faith with students. “Growing up Catholic, I was always immersed in my faith. It feels good to be able to talk to students about God.”
Diane Benz is thrilled to spend the day sharing her love of math with middle school students. When Principal Kramer advised her that each class is 1.5 hours, longer than most other subjects, she responded, “That’s wonderful!”

Benz, who’s from California, earned a degree in mathematics from California State University, Fullerton. She tried a few jobs after college, but it wasn’t until she became a substitute teacher that she found something she really liked. In 1995, she moved to Minnesota with her two young children for her husband’s job. She eventually began subbing again and earned her teaching license from Macalester College. She has been teaching full time since 2014.

“I always wanted to try teaching at a parochial school,” Benz said. “My kids went to Catholic schools, and I wanted a chance to share my faith.” As the homeroom teacher for sixth grade, she also teaches sixth grade religion.

Benz is busy getting up to speed on the new math curriculum and feels like the year is off to a great start. “I never thought I wanted to teach middle school,” she admits. “But I’ve landed with a great group of kids and a great team that is very welcoming. It’s been a joy.”

As the third grade teacher, Brigid Krause loved being part of the COS community, but due to COVID-19, her doctor advised her to take the 2020-21 school year off because she was pregnant and had underlying health issues.

Now the proud mother of a baby boy, she’s returned as the English Language Learner (ELL) instructor. It’s a new, part-time position which supports the 33% of students at COS who speak a language at home other than English. Most speak Spanish, but other languages include Hmong and Tagalog. “ELL kids have good skills for communicating with friends and getting by in the world,” Krause explained. “My job is to strengthen their academic language and develop higher level vocabulary for speaking, listening, reading, and writing.”

A graduate of St. Mary’s College in Notre Dame, IN, with 11 years of teaching experience, Krause earned her licensure in ELL at the University of St. Thomas before coming to COS. Having ELL students in her classroom is part of what attracted her to the school. “It’s amazing to see young students who can switch back and forth between two languages, while I struggled to get through Spanish,” she said. “My grandfather was from Mexico and my dad wasn’t supposed to speak Spanish growing up. I feel passionate about supporting these students, so they know being bilingual is a beautiful gift.”

Maybe it was the pandemic, but after happily teaching second grade for nearly twenty years, including ten at COS, Amy Brown decided to make a change. “I thought — why not teach third grade? It’s not a huge change but it seemed like a fun thing to do.”

This year Brown was delighted to welcome back her former students as third graders, and get to focus on full-time, in-person instruction with them. “In the classroom you’re very much in the present moment with the kids, which I really enjoy,” she said. “Teachers juggle fifty thoughts at once, with an eye on everybody, and each student needs something different. It’s nice to be able to do that with everyone together in the classroom again.”

Brown is a long-time member of St. Matthew’s parish and taught at the school for eight years before moving to COS. She earned her teaching degree from the University of Minnesota, Morris and her Master’s from the University of St. Thomas. Before teaching, she served for two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Paraguay.

Having been at COS since it opened, she’s excited about the school’s trajectory. “Every year there are improvements — new resources, classroom materials, curriculums,” Brown said. “There are always new challenges, but the school is headed in a really good direction.”
565 Donors Contributed $393,920 for Tuition Assistance
Record-Breaking Generosity Helps School Close Gap and Change Lives

The opportunity gap refers to the difference in education achievements between different groups of students, such as white students and students of color, or students from higher-income and lower-income households. Minnesota has one of the highest opportunity gaps in the country. In 2019 the state ranked 50th for racial disparities in high school graduation rates. No child should be denied opportunities to succeed because of factors beyond their control, such as race, ethnicity, and zip code.

In a faith-based, loving, and safe environment, Community of Saints constantly strives to remove barriers to academic achievement and create opportunities for all students to reach their full potential. Your generous gifts to Alums & Friends & Families Tuition Assistance Fund make this important work possible. At Community of Saints, where over 90% of students receive financial assistance, your donations are truly changing the lives of children and their families. Thank you for your support.

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Liz Doby, an independent hair stylist, had been told by one of her customers many times that she should check out Community of Saints (COS). She never seriously considered it. “I told her there’s no way I can afford private school for four kids, it’s not possible,” Liz said. “She told me I should I talk to them anyway.”

Despite her doubts, Liz visited the school last summer and said it was love at first sight. “I loved how the classrooms were set up, and how the middle school was close to the younger kids,” said Liz, who had four kids spread out over two different schools, a preschool, and daycare. “When we talked about tuition, Principal Kramer told me they would work with our family — whatever we can afford.”

While last year wasn’t exactly normal, Liz thought it went great. “The first week my oldest boy told me he really liked the school,” she reported. “He felt challenged, and he especially liked the religion piece.” Liz said her Catholic husband was thrilled.

With her youngest now enrolled in the preschool, all four children are together at COS, and Liz is determined to keep it that way. “We’ve talked about moving and it all comes back to the school. This is where they’re going until 8th grade,” she said. “My kids never come home and say they don’t want to go to school. In fact, my preschooler was upset yesterday because there was no school.”

In addition to having her children all together, safe, and happy, Liz appreciates the other COS families she’s met, some she now considers close friends. “It’s such an amazing community of tightly bonded people that were once strangers, and now feel like family,” she said with wonder. “I want to give a big thank you to the donors. This has been really life changing for our family.”
The Lazos Family

The last 18 months haven’t been easy for the Lazos family. First, the pandemic led to a cut in work hours for Norma, the mom, at her office cleaning job. She went from eight hours a day, to six, and then down to four. “I thanked God I still had some hours,” she said. Her husband also worked, but his construction jobs were less reliable, with last-minute cancellations and days lost to bad weather, making the loss of Norma’s steady income painful.

At the same time, Norma was concerned about her family in Nicaragua. Her sister, who is a nurse, had provided medical care for young people injured while protesting the Nicaraguan dictatorship. As a result, her sister and family came under threat from pro-government forces looking for anyone who had aided the protestors. “My sister’s family had to flee,” Norma said. “They could have been killed if they stayed, so they sought asylum here.”

Now, after welcoming the family members into her home, their household has swelled to ten. Money is tight, but at least everyone is safe.

With all the worries, Norma has taken comfort knowing her children are happy and well cared for at school. Her twin daughters, Lizandra and Kassandra, are in first grade, Alexandra is in third grade, and now her niece from Nicaragua, Brihany, is enrolled in fourth grade. Norma explains that the school is a very different experience for Brihany, and she doesn’t know much English, but she loves COS. “The teachers are very nice, and they make the school accessible to everyone,” Norma said through a translator. “When there are school gatherings, it feels like a big family.”

Most important to Norma is the opportunity for her children to learn about Catholic values and have those values reinforced at school. “Here they have religion every day. That gives them a strong foundation.”

Norma said tuition assistance has been crucial. Even with the assistance the family has received in the past, she was unsure if she could afford to send the children this year. “Because of everything that’s happened, it was hard to keep going with tuition,” she said. “But Principal Kramer wanted the kids to stay. She told me if it was because of the money, not to worry. That was good to hear because the kids love their school.”
Loyalty Circle

Our Loyalty Circle honors individuals and families who make a lasting impact on our students and school. Their generosity is critical to our mission of educating all families who desire a Catholic education for their children in this region. Membership in our Loyalty Circle is based on a history of consecutive giving, significant financial support, or inclusion of Community of Saints in estate plans.

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Your contribution is tax deductible and all gifts made by December 31, 2021, will be matched dollar for dollar up to $7,500 thanks to the generous support of an alum and good friend of COS. Call Doug Luser at 651-457-2510 for more information.
Bernard grew up in an orphanage in Haiti, and at the age of seven, was adopted by a Minnesota family. He didn’t speak English, couldn’t read or write, and had never been to school. Shortly after arriving, the mother in his adopted family became ill, so Denise and Bill Muske became Bernard’s foster family. Coincidentally, they had just moved to a home on Bernard Street. “It seemed like a sign we were meant to be here together,” said Bill.

A Catholic education was important to the Muskes but they weren’t optimistic given Bernard’s special needs. They were delighted to learn that COS had a relationship with the public school system that allowed students with an Individualized Education Plan to receive services. “Most Catholic schools don’t have that option,” said Bill. “We definitely saw God’s hand in that.”

Bernard enrolled in third grade, and Denise remembers for the first two years, she was required to go on field trips because of Bernard’s emotional ups and downs; after fourth grade, it was optional. “Bernard did so much growing and maturing those two years because of the stability he had at home and school,” said Denise. “He was in a loving environment all the way around.”

As an eighth grader, Bernard has mostly caught up to his peers in every subject area. “That’s a huge testament to Bernard and his teachers,” said Denise. “The personal interest they’ve shown in ensuring Bernard’s success, and the accommodations they’ve been willing to make have leveled the playing field for him.”

The Muskes are now Bernard’s legal parents, and they hope to find a high school that will continue to nurture his many talents. When the middle school science teacher at COS told them how much Bernard enjoyed science and robotics, it was an eye-opener for Bill. “That’s changed our thoughts of what the future could hold for him, and what he could become.”
The Good News is published quarterly by

Alums & Friends & Families

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Greetings from the North Shore!

Special Thanks
TO JEANNINE MARIE PHOTOGRAPHY

Jeannine Pohl, pictured with her son, Jayvin, a kindergartner at COS, is responsible for the beautiful photos of students in this issue. Thank you, Jeannine!

To see more of Jeannine’s work, visit her website at Jeanninemarie.com.

ABOVE: COS 8th graders, along with teachers and chaperones, during a week immersed in science and nature studies at Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center.