

Executive Summary

In the Fall of 2022, a consultant from Marian University was engaged to study the viability and feasibility of beginning a new Catholic school ministry at St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church. Issues investigated included: desirability, timing, finances, grade span, location, and design of a potential school. The consultant reviewed financial and demographic data, held 19 individual interviews, conducted focus groups with 42 participants, and analyzed survey responses from 319 parishioners and families with children already enrolled in the parish ECDC.

The results of the study indicate that there is a true need and desire for a Catholic school at St. Francis Xavier. The overall idea for a Catholic school has widespread support among parents, parishioners, staff, and parish council leaders. There are differences of opinion about timing.

On one hand, the parish has momentum and is led by a pastor who is passionate about Catholic schools and has experience as a Catholic school administrator. There is a window of opportunity for the parish to benefit from this leadership before diocesan pastoral assignments change this reality at an unknown time in the future. There is also widespread discontent with social and moral issues in the public schools. On the other hand, parishioners heavily favor building up parish savings as a first priority. The potential for Oklahoma to enact a school choice program would give the parish the opportunity to create a school with lower financial risk.

A parish school should start with grades K-8. Unless a school choice program is enacted for Oklahoma, it is recommended to phase in enrollment, adding 1-2 grades each year until reaching the K-8 configuration. While parents expressed a preference for K-12 Catholic education, a quality high school is a very complex undertaking requiring more specialized teachers, different levels of courses (AP, Honors, etc.), athletics and arts programs, and a larger facility. The parish should start with grades K-8 and revisit the demand for high school after establishing a solid reputation.

The parish should make plans for a new school building to be constructed on the parish campus. While renovating an existing property has short-term advantages, it will not best serve the parish or the school in the long-run. A school on the main campus will be more integrated with the life of the parish, provide room for growth, and allow the parish to consider space needs of the ECDC and other parish ministries at the same time, potentially solving several problems at once.

Parishioners and parents also expressed a common desire for the school to be solidly Catholic – teaching the faith, promoting virtues, and helping students and families develop a closer relationship with Jesus Christ. Great attention in the planning process should be given to developing strong Catholic identity, school culture, and high academic quality. The school is also encouraged to create a bilingual and bicultural environment that welcomes and values both Latino and Anglo families, languages, and cultures. The school can help develop children to be bridges between these two cultures that too often exist separately in parishes.

St. Francis Xavier is a dynamic parish and the addition of a Catholic school will further advance its mission to evangelize Payne County. May God bless the work ahead.

Final Findings

- It is clear that a Catholic school meets a true need for parents and the community of Stillwater and Payne County.
- The idea of a Catholic school has widespread support among parents, parishioners, parish staff, and parish council leaders, the only disagreement seems to be about timing.
- The parish should look to create a K-8 school initially. A high school is too complex to start with. The parish should revisit the high school idea after the K-8 school has established a solid reputation in the community and the interest in high school education can be reassessed.
- If a school choice program is enacted for Oklahoma, the parish could consider starting all grades at once. If not, it is recommended to phase in enrollment with 1-2 additional grades each year until reaching a K-8 configuration.
- The parish should not pursue the ProAgrica Property. While it is attractive in the short-term, it will not meet the long-term growth needs of the school and poses some unique challenges. The parish would be better off planning for a new school building on its existing campus or adjoining property.
- Donor funds to build a new school building will be much more likely when Oklahoma enacts a school choice program, or when parish savings have increased and other special projects have been completed.
- The parish should hire a principal at least 12 months before opening so that he/she will have the necessary time for planning, hiring, recruiting, and building community relationships.
- Great attention should be given to developing a strong Catholic identity, school culture, and high academic quality.
- The school should be tuition-based. Parishioners and parents do not appear willing to participate in a full stewardship model at this time.
- It is recommended that a new school be intentional about creating a bilingual and bicultural environment that welcomes and values Latino and Anglo families and cultures. The school can use children to create a bridge between these two cultures that often exist separately in parishes.