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St. Charles parents react to school closing

St. Charles School will be restructured into an early childhood center, closing its elementary and middle school in June.

[Maria-Pia Negro](#) | Catholic Herald



Courtesy photo

St. Charles School, the oldest Catholic school in Arlington, is closing its elementary and middle schools after more than 90 years.



Parents at St. Charles Borromeo School received news Jan. 13 from Father Horace H. “Tuck” Grinnell, pastor of St. Charles Borromeo Church in Arlington, that the school will close its elementary and middle school this June to restructure its educational program into an early childhood center. He cited the growth of the current preschool program and low enrollment in kindergarten through eighth grade as the reasons for this difficult decision.

“St. Charles School has a wonderfully diverse student body with an enormously committed and gifted faculty who not only did education well, but faith formation was first-rate both in worship and faith and Christian action,” Father Grinnell said in an interview. “The closing of St. Charles School is a huge sadness, for me, for the parents, for the students and the faculty.”

In a letter to parents, Father Grinnell said that St. Charles began this school year at 52 percent capacity, or 117 students, in grades K through eight but, as statistics show, a private school needs to operate at 90 percent capacity to be fully viable.

“No Catholic school can survive with such low numbers,” Father Grinnell wrote. “As of November, the church has had to subsidize the school \$90,000, in addition to our regular \$15,600 monthly subsidy to the school.”

The reactions from the parents are filled with sorrow over the closing of the place that has nurtured their children, confusion about the sudden decision and concerns about what to do next.

Trish Ward, who has two daughters at St. Charles, said that she was devastated by the news. She shared the school’s happiness in celebrating its 90th anniversary last spring, spent hours volunteering and celebrated every school success. She said that even though people knew about the school’s dwindling enrollment for years, the decision to close the elementary school came as a shock.

“Father Tuck is a great guy, but the way we were told, at night with a letter in the backpack, it felt cold,” she said.

The effect that the news has had in the St. Charles community is a testament to how much parents and children care about the school. Ward said her sixth-grader, who had been going to St. Charles since preschool, was sad about not being able to graduate from the school she is so proud of.

“She got angry first and then she cried; she is mourning,” Ward said. “One thing my daughter was crying about was that she would never get a chance to receive her ‘eaglet award’ — a made-up award that eighth-graders (who have attended the school since preschool) get at graduation. My daughter is so proud to have been in the school for that long.”

Alicia Schoshinski, who has been an active parishioner for 15 years and is part of the enrollment management committee, said that she wished somebody told them sooner about the situation being so dire. They were just about to launch outreach efforts to military and foreign service families and others to boost enrollment and were planning to revamp the school’s website when they heard the news.

“We would have tripled our efforts,” she said. “Parents would have come up with a plan had we been told.”

Schoshinski and her husband met with Father Grinnell Jan. 14 to share their concerns about the process and the lack of involvement of the stakeholders. Now, as they get over their shock and frustration, they must find a school for their three children.

In his letter, Father Grinnell explained that this decision was not taken lightly, especially considering that St. Charles, the original Catholic school in Arlington County, had just celebrated its 90th anniversary last year. Father Grinnell consulted with Sister Bernadette McManigal, diocesan superintendent of schools, and Arlington Bishop Paul S. Loverde, who agreed with the decision. The elementary and middle school will close at the end of this school year, in June, and the preschool program will expand.

Moving forward

Sister Bernadette said that there are efforts being made to help parents and teachers in the transition.

And Father Grinnell said that local schools in the area have agreed to welcome St. Charles students in order to give families the benefit of a Catholic education. The schools he mentioned include St. Thomas More, St. Ann and St. Agnes in Arlington; St. James and Corpus Christi in Falls Church; St. Rita and Queen of Apostles in Alexandria; and St. Bernadette in Springfield. He said that many of these schools will reach out to parents to give them more details about open houses and registration procedures.

Sister Bernadette added that St. Charles teachers would be given priority to interview for job openings in nearby Catholic schools.

“I’m certainly going to be working beside the teachers because there are very good teachers in that school,” she said.

Angela Rowley, St. Charles principal, shared the families’ sadness. She joined St. Charles first as a parent 18 years ago, became a teacher in 2000 and started serving as principal last fall.

“It is always hard to let something you love change,” she said. She added that she will work with the Office of Catholic Schools to help parents and also to ensure the school keeps its Catholic identity when it becomes a childhood center. “I am committed to making the best early childhood education program. That’s what I have been tasked to and will do it with all my heart,” she said.

The preschool program at St. Charles has been successful over the last 10 years, growing from one class with 12 students a decade ago, to six classes with 92 students.

Rowley said that elementary students will continue receiving the same spirit — the one that seeks to bring out the best in every child — during the remainder of the school year. “We will give current students the best education we can for the rest of the year,” she said.

Corey Grant, father of five St. Charles students, enrolled his children in 2009 because it was close to his work. He is still trying to recover from the shock, but right now he said he would rather think of the closing as “a beautiful movie with a bad ending that you cannot rewrite.”

“This afternoon I came to the point where we just have to move on,” Grant said. “We have to be proactive and find a school that is best for the kids and our needs.”

Anne Marie Finley, mother of a first-grader, said that, even though nearby Catholic schools have been very helpful when she called them, she is worried that there will not be enough spaces in the local Catholic schools.

As part of the Parent Teacher Organization, Finley participated in an informal effort to identify options for fellow parents while filing applications for her own daughter.

“Some parents have one child and other parents have multiple children and this is very discouraging,” she said. “The lateness of the news has significantly undercut our ability as parents to find another Catholic school in a location that works for us.”

Other options

Rose McDermott, president of the St. Charles PTO, said that parents met with Father Grinnell Jan. 16 to talk about the possibility of keeping the school open and were told that the decision would not be reversed.

Father Grinnell was to hold a meeting with parents Jan. 23 to answer questions and strategize about what to do next.

Parents should hear from parent leaders from each class and also from the PTO.

Parents are concerned that they need to move quickly. Some schools are holding open houses for St. Charles families in addition to the ones scheduled for Catholic Schools Week. (See below.)

The Office of Catholic Schools said that St. Rita was to hold a meeting Jan. 21 for St. Charles families interested in attending next year. St. Agnes will have an open house Jan. 24, according to McDermott.

McDermott said a group of parents will send a letter to the diocese and Bishop Loverde to let them how the school closing is affecting them.

As parents try to make sense of the situation and move forward, people in the community remember how St. Charles School has nurtured each student to become caring individuals since the school welcomed its first eight students in September 1922.

In addition to sharing photos and anecdotes via social media, alumni and other people associated with the school are sharing stories about how St. Charles helped them grow. Many also mentioned the legacy of the Benedictine Sisters like Sister Benedict Kesock, “Sister B,” who served as principal for more than 30 years before Linda Lacot became the school’s first lay principal in 2008.

“As principal, Sister Benedict's faith in God and her commitment to God's children was an inspiration for her entire staff,” said Joanne McGlinchy, a former St. Charles teacher, assistant principal and preschool director. “When a child needed comfort, Sister knew the words to say and when a child needed guidance, Sister would either very firmly or very gently direct the lost. And when there was a need for a good laugh, Sister B was always there.”

The motto of the school, “Feel the Spirit,” and the Benedictine spirit of inclusion and hospitality made the school very diverse as it welcomed students from different cultural, ethnic and economic backgrounds.

“You could see that immediately. That made us what we are and who we are,” said McGlinchy, who started working at St. Charles as a teacher in 1996 and retired in 2012. “Something I told the kids is that you never leave St. Charles and it never leaves you. And they understood that.”

McGlinchy said she shares the pain of the parents and teachers but that the connection with St. Charles, one that took 90 years to build, will stay alive.

“So many people were involved in what became the spirit of St. Charles School,” she said. “Right now the school is still open and the spirit will stay. It can’t be taken away.”

“(Preschool Director) Margaret Leckey, Principal Rowley and the teachers will continue to make St. Charles School, St. Charles,” she said. “Whatever it becomes, it will continue to keep that spirit alive.”

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Find out more

To learn more about the restructuring decision, call St. Charles Borromeo Church at 703/527-5500.

To learn more about the St. Charles parents’ meeting, call PTO President Rose McDermott at 703/225-9972.