



## **School Branding, Catholic Identity and Healthy Culture**

Last week Mrs Dunphey unveiled our [new branding](#) to all of the families of the school, which articulates our school culture (values) and our “why.” We believe the colors, fonts, language, and logos capture the uniqueness of our school path and communicate it effectively. Since I believe our unveiling of our branding can help take our school to the next level, I’d like to say a few words about our Catholic identity and how we are growing in that.

### **I. The Uniqueness of Catholic Education at Our School**

We know where you send your kids to school is one of the most important decisions that you make for them. We also know there’s something special about our school. Our school is not special simply because the parent involvement and the sense of community is exceptional. It’s not special simply because we have top-notch teachers who, dedicated to academic excellence, create learning environments in which each child is challenged according to the most effective teaching methods today. St Patrick Catholic School is special precisely because in an age of moral and spiritual confusion, we intentionally form the whole child (body, mind, soul) according to the brilliance of the Catholic intellectual, moral, and spiritual tradition.

A sound education, therefore, cannot be reduced to downloading the knowledge of facts into the heads of little children. It’s also about forming the minds and hearts of children so that they have the moral character to make wise decisions in life. It’s about helping children explore the big questions in life, which helps them to know who they are and where they are going. Fundamentally, at St Pat’s we declare with great conviction that we are known and loved by God and that in his Son Jesus we have the forgiveness of sins and the hope of eternal life. Knowing they are loved, students at St Pat’s are positioned to make a big difference in this short life on the way to eternity.

### **II. Our Catholic Identity: “Where the Love of God is, There is Purpose”**

In our new branding we have the tagline, “Where the Love of God is, There is Purpose” because we truly believe that God’s love gives meaning and direction to life. And he loves every part of us. Therefore, we are not ashamed to say that our school is fundamentally different from public and other kinds of private schools because we teach and live out of the unshakable conviction that Christianity is true. Because God has revealed himself in his Son Jesus, we can know who God is, who we are, what he’s done for us, and how we are to respond to his love. If God’s love revealed in Jesus is real, it changes everything.

All of this deeply impacts the kind of school culture we have, what we teach and how we teach. One of the most significant contributions of an authentic Christian education is our robust and holistic anthropology (study of the nature of human person), according to which we can articulate and protect the inherent dignity of each person. This anthropology further provides students a sound moral framework into which they understand how to use their freedom and become the kind of citizens of earth and heaven destined for them.

### **III. Our Catholic School Culture**

At St Pat's School, we understand that the popular culture in which we live is increasingly corrosive of this unique Christian vision of reality. Compound this with the real challenges of living out our Christian faith today. The challenges of raising kids, the busyness of life, relationship difficulties, and cultural/political divides—all of which have been exacerbated by the pandemic—can make living out our faith even more difficult. What makes matters worse is that the culture in which we live is moving away from the Christian worldview and, as the consequential societal breakdown shows, is giving way to a darker, godless worldview. This shift significantly changes how we think about the world and what we believe is important for education.<sup>1</sup>

#### **a. Parental/School Partnership**

Since educating children in a Catholic parochial school is a partnership between parents, parish and school, we know that parent partnership is critical to our success in passing on the faith to them. On our end we are fortifying the teaching of our faith and offering kids a healthy environment to learn the faith and ask tough questions about God. This helps students grow in their critical thinking around matters of faith and reason. We offer opportunities for kids to know God through prayer, reflection, study and relationships. Our parish is also important as it invests more resources, time and energy in helping parents succeed in passing on the faith to their children. Taking note of the culture in which we live is what led our parish to develop a new and [more effective Confirmation program](#) to help parents ensure their kids are ready for the Sacrament of Confirmation.

We also know that it is precisely because parents have the primary responsibility of raising kids in the faith, that we rely on the parents as well to reinforce—or at the very least, not blatantly contradict by their teaching or their lives—the fundamentals of the Christian faith we teach to the students. Last fall year we had asked you to sign the Diocesan Covenant and the St Pat's Family-School Covenant for this very reason.

Because we strongly believe our school-parental partnership is in the best interest of the students in light of our mission, we are now requiring all current and prospective families to sign the [Diocesan-Family Covenant](#) and the [St Pat's School-Family Covenant \(updated\)](#) by **April 1, 2022**.

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief description on the stark contrast between a secular and a Christian education, see my brief [2020 Catholic Schools Week 2020 reflection](#).

Given the sensitive nature of these documents, it's really important to read them carefully so that we know what they are saying and not saying. Here are a few points that might help:

- We're fully aware that parents send their kids to our school for multiple reasons. As I point out in my letter to the school family two years ago, [A Promise for the Future - Both Ways](#), we strongly believe that we can have a private school with excellence in academics and an unwaveringly strong Catholic culture. It's not an either/or.
- The word "strive" in the second part of the School-Family document is very important. The purpose of this section is an exhortation and agreement to a basic minimum of *moral effort* which gives our school a chance at forming a healthy culture of discipleship. This will be challenging for some and easy for others. For those who might feel discouraged, parents don't need to be perfect at these to have their kids at the school, but consider this gentle call to aim higher as a helpful guide.
- Our school is not for the perfect. No one has to be perfect in their relationship with God, or even in a certain place in their faith to send their kids to our school. In fact, it's precisely because God always meets us where we are at with his mercy that he calls us to follow him to live in the new life he won for us. Being challenged in our faith can be uncomfortable for sure. However, we also know that, given who he is and what he's done for us, loyalty to Jesus and following him is life-saving. The witness and resultant credibility of God in the lives of your children is also life-giving. So our challenge, however uncomfortable and awkward as it can be, is totally worth it.
- We also know that not every family in our school community is Catholic and we warmly welcome non-Catholic families who can sign the covenant.
- Finally, a brief note about striving to teach the Christian worldview to your children. It's very important to strive to understand and adopt a Christian perspective on hot button issues because a thoroughly Christian perspective on these issues (per usual) makes all the difference.<sup>2</sup> Children need that strong support in this difficult age in which we live. Since we care about leading out of a Christian worldview, Mrs Dunphy and I instituted the [New Diocesan Policy on Gender](#) last year and I wrote my [Pastoral Note on Critical Race Theory](#) earlier this year. When we take God's word seriously, it changes how we see things. Since kids are watching us, it's helpful for us to know how to help them.<sup>3</sup>

If you have any questions about these covenants, please don't hesitate to ask me or Mrs Dunphy.

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<sup>2</sup> For an outstanding resource for parents on how to talk to their kids (big and little) about hot button issues, see [Leila Miller and Trent Horn. Made This Way: How to Prepare Kids to Face Today's Tough Moral Issues \(2018\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> For a succinct and powerful introduction to the Christian worldview, see [John Riccardo. Rescued: The Unexpected and Extraordinary News of the Gospel \(2021\)](#).

## **b. New Healthy Communication Agreement**

Finally, the values articulated in our brand strike to the heart of how we behave as a school, especially in how we treat and communicate with each other. The presence of our values means that both parents and teachers/administration can hold each other accountable to these values and see the high bar we are setting for our school culture. Since these are core values, we will not tolerate us not living according to them. To this end, Mrs Dunphey, Mrs Manial and I wrote a new [Healthy Communication Agreement](#) which articulates our vision for a healthy school culture around communication and how we treat one another. We wish to develop and sustain high morale and a healthy culture of honor, in which we treat each other as children of God. We believe this agreement and the enforcement of it will keep us from developing a toxic school subculture of gossip, disrespect, and divisiveness which is so present in our world. Starting this year, all current and prospective families who wish to enroll students will need to sign this agreement by **April 1st, 2022**. Here are a few points about this agreement I'd like to highlight.

- This agreement finds its inspiration in the Christian worldview, which allows us to aim and achieve a healthier culture. To put it another way, it's because of Christ and who we are in him, that we are called to treat each other better. When we live that out by God's grace and mercy, our sense of community shines incredibly bright.
- I know many people join our school because of our great school community. Yet it is precisely because of this Christian foundation of healthy communication that such a community is possible. This is why such a document in which we keep each other accountable to respectful behavior is so important. In some ways we're already there with how we treat each other. But I also need to be really honest here: the behavior reported to me (and witnessed) in our school culture the past five years has been so concerning that it warrants the writing of this document. Together, we can take this new positive approach to protect and enable a healthy relational culture to flourish. We can't do this without you.

### **Our Mission: Mutual Responsibility and Mutual Success**

Perhaps our "why" statement from our new branding process is a fitting way to close:

*"We offer values-driven families an authentic Catholic education so that they can encounter God's love and their children have a steady place to discover their God-given purpose."*

Each of your kids has a God-given purpose to their life. Our school exists to help them discover that purpose. My prayer is that as we implement our new brand, we all will take renewed responsibility for playing our part to ensure that we can provide an authentic Catholic education that makes this discovery possible.

Your servant in Christ,

Fr. Mathias Thelen

Pastor  
St Patrick Catholic Parish