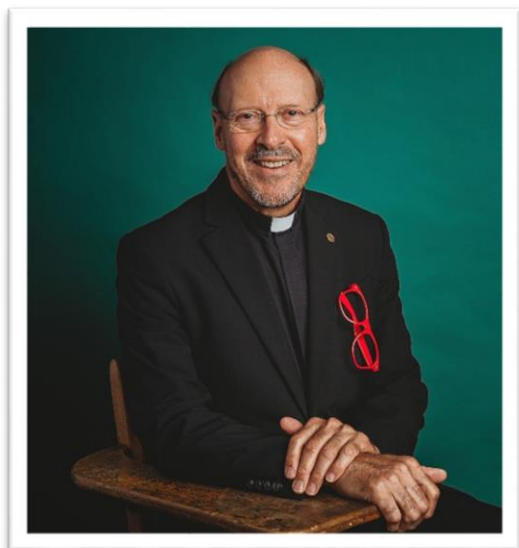


## **Saint Thomas the Apostle School Commemorates 30 Years of Service By Fr. James Chelich and Celebrates the Culture of Belonging Heralded Under His Leadership.**

Over the past three decades, Fr. Jim has shepherded the Saint Thomas community through extraordinary times. His vision of a dynamic education centered in Christ has always included students of all abilities and, by encouraging parishioners with disabilities to have active roles in church life, he has fostered an “All Belong” school and parish community.



At Saint Thomas, a culture of belonging benefits the entire school and parish community. It enables students without a disability to know diverse individuals and have peers and friends with unique differences from their own. Inclusion is an integral part of our school’s vision and model, serving our parish and school community. Throughout his tenure, Fr. Jim has been steadfast in the belief that “we don’t do this because it is the nice thing to do, we do this because it is the right thing to do.”

With Christ as our model, Saint Thomas promises to educate students in their faith, while teaching them to extend fellowship, service, and leadership to each other and the greater community. We seek to educate all children regardless of their needs, not to separate a child from their siblings, their parish community, and their faith based on academic, behavioral, social, or emotional need. Saint Thomas has always been driven by a desire to serve the needs of its parishioners, but has not always had a plan to do so. This document aims to identify the school’s current strengths and articulate the needs of the school for the future.

## **History**

Before Saint Thomas began its journey as an inclusive school, Fr. Jim had fostered an inclusive parish community by encouraging parishioners with special needs to have active roles in church life.

Around 2004, former principal Dave Faber was approached by parishioners to see if their daughter who had Down Syndrome could attend Saint Thomas. Dave said, “I’d like to walk this journey with you.” This student was a kid who everybody knew and loved. The school then welcomed two other children with special needs. Dave reached out to Christian Learning Network (now All Belong) for additional support and he hired a part-time resource teacher. Dave had been encouraged to embrace inclusion at NCEA conferences, with the idea that schools should “embrace the people in their community and figure it out as you go.” He admitted that “we weren’t good at it. We were trying to figure out how to include people with high needs in the classroom, but we quickly began to realize how much these students were helping all of the other students in the classroom.”

Suzi Furtwangler, who became principal in 2010, took this support even further by hiring a full-time ESS Director with two additional part-time aides. Around 2012, Audrey Lou Jandernoa was born. Suzi said, “I

can't wait for her to get here." Her mom replied, "I'm not sure you will be ready." The school was ready, but not for how much Audrey Lou would positively impact the direction of the school.

## Catholic Social Teaching on Inclusion

Although we are called to reach out to the margins and open our school doors so that every child made in God's image may be served, it is estimated that only 1% of the nation's students with disabilities attend private schools (an estimated 40% of this 1% is Catholic). Like many local and national schools, Saint Thomas has been working to become an inclusive school for over twenty years supporting learners of varied abilities and backgrounds. According to the most recent study from the National Center for Education Statistics 78.4% of Catholic schools serve students with mild to moderate disabilities. Our educators consistently experience students with learning differences absent of diagnoses every day.

There is substantial Catholic Doctrine supporting inclusion including The Code of Canon Law and the Obligation of Parents to educate their Child. Item number 4 of the US Catholic Bishops Statement on Disabilities states: "Defense of the right of life implies the defense of all other rights that enable the individual with the disability to achieve the fullest measure of personal development of which he or she is capable. These include the right to equal opportunity in education, in employment, in housing, in healthcare, as well as the right to free access to public accommodations, facilities, and services." Additionally, Catholic Social Teaching compels Catholic schools to strive to include traditionally marginalized students. The Church calls for inclusion for those with disabilities in all of our ministries (Benedict XVI, 2005, 2008; Francis 2016, John Paul II 1981).

### Defining Inclusion

Inclusion means we are serving the families of our parish and educating all of our community to the best of our ability. We are providing in-school support for a variety of needs:

- Counseling (25 Students)
- Sensory Breaks
- Behavioral Plans (9 Students)
- Subject specific tutoring
- Modified academic curriculum within the classroom
- Pull-out modified curriculum
- Physical assistance

## Inclusion at Saint Thomas the Apostle

Special education is not just for a select number of students, it is for every student. However, students are often broken into categories in regards to how much support they need. Inclusion benefits the entire school and parish community. It enables students without a disability to know diverse individuals and have peers and friends uniquely different than they are. Inclusion is an integral part of our school's vision and model.

## **The foundation for supporting our students starts by investing in our staff:**

### Director of Student Support

- Support the General Education teachers so that most students' needs are met within the classroom
- Model instruction in universal design so that our teachers can have 1 lesson plan that suits every student
- Assumes the responsibility of modifying instruction as necessary for low incidence disabilities
- Establish clear acceptance guidelines for enrollment including framework to evaluate our ability to help that child succeed
- Augment the existing student handbook to meet any additional needs
- Ensure that neuro-typical students are taught skills to build fellowship with their differently-abled peers (peer mentoring)

### **Professional Development**

Building the knowledge and skills to effectively program for our whole population including education on why our Church doctrine tells us we must move forward with inclusive education.

- I. All Belong Partnership
- II. Program for Inclusive Education, Notre Dame
- III. National conferences, workshops, etc.

## **Next Steps:**

In *Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disability: A Framework of Access and Inclusion* (1998) the Bishops said: "Costs must never be the controlling consideration limiting the welcome offered to those among us with disabilities, since provision of access to religious functions is a pastoral duty." Nonetheless, we need to find a way to make our ability to support students sustainable. This is a challenge that Catholic schools have faced in the United States for as long as Catholic schools have existed. Supporting a student in the 21st century requires dynamic thinking and creative solutions. Saint Thomas strives to equip each student with the finest academic education possible so that they may engage the world competently and skillfully, and take their place as creative actors in their professions and trades, and in their families and communities. How can we fund our deficits in the future to ensure that we are fulfilling our mission and that the needs of every child are met?