



## Schools “R” Us

### If We Want Good Schools, Community Involvement Is The First Step



If you visit an average-sized Missouri town on Friday night, what do you see? The lights from the local high school beckon. Chances are a basketball game is underway. If you enter the field house and talk to people in the stands, most will tell you their kids are doing fine.

Some of these students are making plans for college; others are hunting up job prospects. Some on the basketball court may have attended a Catholic elementary school, but now they are a part of this public high school and they feel at home. They know the other kids; this is their town.

Across Missouri local schools represent the heart and soul of communities. In this *Messenger* the Missouri Catholic Conference (MCC) tells the story of how school leaders in Joplin stepped forward after the devastating 2011 tornado to rebuild that city and ensure their children would continue to receive quality education. The Joplin story is only one example of how local schools and communities are working together.

In the novelty surrounding charter schools and other school reform ideas, more traditional schools can be overlooked. But this is a mistake. These schools anchor local communities. Even in an urban area, a school like St. Louis Catholic Academy serves as a stabilizing force. Almost half of the students live within a

two-mile radius of the school.

But local schools, especially smaller ones, face daunting challenges these days. Some Catholic schools with long and venerable traditions of service are closing, such as St. Elizabeth Academy in St. Louis, which first opened its doors in 1882 and will close at the end of this school year. Meanwhile, smaller school districts struggle to remain viable.

At the present time, the MCC is in dialogue with public and private school officials, school parents and others about how our state can preserve the local schools that have served communities so well for so long. The MCC has developed a proposal – the Missouri Schoolhouse Initiative – as a basis for this discussion. The Missouri Schoolhouse Initiative is a community-based approach for improving educational opportunities for students. The initiative seeks to revitalize community commitment to local schools.

The initiative would not raise taxes on any Missouri taxpayer; instead a tax credit would be offered to taxpayers who donate to foundations that provide assistance to schools and students.

Public schools could use the funds raised and given to them by a foundation for a variety of academic programs, such as science and computer labs, foreign languages, mathematics, arts and literature and professional development of teachers. Foundations could also offer assistance to students for attendance at accredited private or parochial schools.

Such foundations exist now. For example, here in Jefferson City, where the MCC is headquartered, foundations already are in place that provide assistance to the public school district and Helias Catholic High School. The tax credit offered through the Missouri Schoolhouse Initiative would encourage more donations to these foundations and allow them to provide more funds to schools.

Of the total amount of tax credits claimed, 60 percent would be used to assist public school districts, while 40 percent would provide assistance to children who learn best in non-public school settings.

The tax credit program would have an annual cap: no more than \$90 million could be claimed by all taxpayers in a single year. State aid to a school district could not be reduced because the district has received funds from a Missouri Schoolhouse Foundation. The Missouri Schoolhouse Initiative seeks to supplement (not replace) public funding of public schools.

The Missouri Schoolhouse Initiative is an effort to respect local leaders and their decisions. School districts would decide how to use the funds received from a Missouri Schoolhouse Foundation. The initiative rejects the idea that all the best ideas for education must come from Washington or Jefferson City.

The MCC invites input from all Missouri citizens on this initiative. Intrigued? Want to learn more, or offer suggestions? Contact the MCC at [mocatholic@mocatholic.org](mailto:mocatholic@mocatholic.org).

## Private School Attendance Lessens Burden on Taxpayers

Missouri taxpayers save almost \$800 million annually because of families who send their children to non-public schools.

According to a survey of private schools (Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, Independent, etc.) conducted by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), 81,196 students were enrolled in

private schools for school year 2011-2012. (The survey is voluntary and so not all schools respond.)

If these private school students had attended public schools, taxpayers would have paid a lot more. For school year 2011-2012 the state average current expenditure per average daily attendance (ADA) of public school students

was \$9,812.66. This includes all federal, state and local public monies spent on public school students.

If one multiplies this state average expenditure per ADA by the number of private school students, the additional cost of educating the private school students would be \$796,748,741.30. ( $\$9,812.66 \times 81,196 = \$796,748,741.30$ )

# Joplin Superintendent Touts Community Involvement

*Joplin Public School Superintendent C. J. Huff has forged strong bonds with churches, businesses and others in the community as part of his goal to ensure that all children receive a quality education.*

By: Rita Linhardt

Superintendent C. J. Huff was just leaving the high school graduation ceremony when he heard the warning sirens. It was 5:17 p. m. As he was driving home he encountered high winds, a wall of water and saw trees breaking. He made it home safely. The rest of the town was not so fortunate.

It was May 22, 2011, and an EF5 tornado had just hit Joplin, Missouri. In an instant, life for the town and the Superintendent of the Joplin Public School System would be drastically changed.

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Going into education was an easy choice for C. J. Huff. “Everyone in my family was either a farmer or an educator.”

Growing up in the small eastern Kansas community of McCune, Huff spent eight years after high school farming before he attended college and followed others in his family into the education field.

A graduate of Pittsburg State University, he came to Missouri in 1997 as a teacher in the Bolivar School District. Over the next 11 years while working on his masters and doctorate he served in administrative positions in Bolivar, Springfield, Nixa, and Eldon, Missouri. In July 2008, Huff took the position of superintendent of the Joplin School District, the largest school district in southwest Missouri.

Working in the various school systems taught Huff some important lessons. He learned that relationships are important and the more engaged the community is in the school the more successful the students will be.

“Too many times we see a ‘sandbox’ mentality in education, where the school tries to go it alone,” said Huff.

Huff knew that he would need outside help if he was to successfully tackle some of the serious problems facing the school district. One out of every four students in the Joplin school system dropped out of high school and did not graduate. Many Joplin students struggled with poverty and a lack of parental involvement.

Teachers often spent time and their own money meeting the basic needs of the students. It

became evident that to graduate more students the community would need to be involved.

With the support of the school board, a community breakfast was held in April 2010. Representatives from businesses, social service agencies and the faith community attended. Huff shared the challenges facing his students and the school district. He sought community input and help.

The reaction was astonishing. Forty-seven people stepped forward to help. The individuals formed teams and talked with every school in the district to find out their needs.

By June the group had identified “7 Now Needs” for the district. These included a prayer chain for kids, a “stuff the bus” campaign to get school supplies, and an Eagle Angel project - a cash fund to help with essentials for students.

Additional meetings were held and the vision for Bright Futures began to take shape. Through joint school and community efforts Bright Futures provided a framework to connect community resources with student and family needs, often within 24 hours.

Initially, because of the separation of church and state, there was a hesitation with some local churches in the community to get involved with the school system and Bright Futures.

“As educators, we were often told to keep the faith community at arms’ length,” said Huff. “But because of critical conversations, some walls were broken down.”

Over time the churches realized that while they couldn’t be the voice of God in public schools, they could be His hands, helping students as mentors, tutors, etc. In the end Huff noted that the faith-based community was the “sleeping giant” in getting Bright Futures up and running.

“The faith community understood the concepts of time, talent and treasure that are the foundation of Bright Futures,” he said.

To prove this point he shared the story of Emerson Elementary School, one of the poorest, high-risk schools in the district. In late 2010 he came to Emerson to present a community check at a school assembly. When walking

into the gym he noticed that all the students were wearing bright, hand knitted scarves, hats and gloves. At the assembly were two elderly, disabled women from a small nearby Baptist church. They served on the local Bright Futures site committee. Fearing that many of the students at the school would not have warm clothing for winter, the ladies had taken it upon themselves to hand knit the winter clothes for all 230 students. When the women ran out of their own yarn they called on friends and family for additional supplies.

“You could tell the children were so proud of the clothing,” said Huff. “Part of the purpose of that school assembly was to thank the church ladies for their work.”

Another example of the support from the faith-based community came from McAuley Catholic High School. The students did a major fund-raising campaign and collected over \$1,400 and other items for the Eagle Angel project. Huff was honored to go to the school to receive the donations.

“It’s not very often that a public school administrator can go into a private, Catholic school and thank those students for helping his students,” Huff said.

Another component of Bright Futures is the service learning aspect that encourages students to give back to the community. By assessing local situations the students work with community leaders to find solutions to area problems.

“This builds leadership capacity in our students,” said Huff. “Without this aspect, Bright Futures would just be another social service program.”

Huff is equally proud of the adult leadership development component of Bright Futures. Twenty-one adults from the community are selected at a time to attend eight, three-hour sessions. They learn about brain development in children and the effects of poverty. They hear from police officers, judges, counselors and drop-outs to learn their perspective on challenges facing the community. A highlight of the training is a bus tour of the city seeing problems first hand.

“The community didn’t always understand the societal issues facing

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# Continued: Joplin Superintendent Touts Community Involvement

the students,” said Huff. “This training gives them new insights.”

Bright Futures provides a way for the Joplin school system to open its doors to the community and, in turn, gives the community a vested interest in the success of their students. Little did anyone realize in April 2010 how important those relationships would be a year later when the tornado struck.

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It didn't take Huff long to realize the devastation that hit Joplin that May Sunday. Unable to drive the entire distance to his office, Huff ended up walking seven blocks. Along the way he saw his first fatality. Meanwhile he was receiving text messages about damage to his schools. It was then that he came upon the debris field, smoke rising in the air.

“I looked to the left and to the right and as far as I could see there was total destruction.” The catastrophic storm cut a path about a mile wide and six miles long through the town. The tornado ranks as one of the most deadly and costliest storms in U.S. history with 161 casualties and over 2,000 buildings destroyed.

In the surreal hours that followed, Huff did what he could to help. He quickly dispatched the school buses. For the next few days the buses served as ambulances and rescue vehicles, saving lives.

By early the next morning Huff had assembled his administrative team. Their immediate assignments were to determine the status of the students/staff, assess the status of the school buildings and secure the valuables (student records, medicines) from the damaged buildings.

Going 66 hours without sleep Huff was overwhelmed. He struggled with what the role of the school system should be in the recovery efforts. Then he realized that the school should be doing what it does best: taking care of children.

“We needed to get the kids out of the rubble. We needed to keep the children safe so parents could do the necessary things to rebuild.”

Huff then decided on a plan of action. School would open on time in just 87 days.

Few believed it was possible. Six schools, including the high school and Franklin Tech, were completely destroyed and four others were damaged. Supplies were lost and families were scattered. Even the State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) thought it was an impossible task. But Huff was determined.

“I knew if we didn't start taking steps forward, it would be even more difficult to make progress. Our current reality was awful and we needed a new focus.”

Huff knew he could not only count on the support of his teachers and staff, but also the community.

“A year earlier, I would not have made that pledge. But because of the relationships we had built through Bright Futures, I knew the community would be there to help.”

What Huff didn't count on was the overwhelming support that came from the region, the state and the nation.

“I was amazed by the outpouring of help and the different kinds of assistance we received.”

The summer moved quickly, but progress was made. Summer school opened in undamaged buildings with a record number of students. School counselors provided trauma counseling to students and parents. Building repairs were made or temporary facilities acquired, and school supplies arrived.

Joplin Public Schools opened as scheduled on August 17, 2011. In an emotional speech to school district employees the



Joplin Superintendent Dr. C. J. Huff in his office.

day before, Huff thanked them for their dedication and work as a team to get the school open.

“Nothing stops us,” said Huff. “We have made people all over the world believers. We have made possible, what many thought was impossible.”

Today Joplin is quietly rebuilding. The debris field is gone and new construction is going up. People are healing, looking to the future.

Two new elementary schools and a middle school will open in the fall. A new public high school is scheduled to open in August 2014. The school district is also continuing to reap the benefits of Bright Futures.

“Our dropout rate has steadily declined over the last three years and attendance rates have risen dramatically. Of course I won't be satisfied until every child is saved,” said Huff.

The Bright Futures model developed in Joplin has become Bright Futures USA, a non-profit organization, with several other communities successfully using its techniques to impact poverty and student achievement.

Huff has received state and national recognition for his leadership in Joplin after the tornado. He is reluctant to take any credit.

“I don't want to be remembered for 87 days. I was just doing what needed to be done.”

Rather he would like his legacy to be that he gave all that he could to help improve the lives of children.

There is little dispute in Joplin that he is doing just that.

*Rita Linhardt is the senior staff associate for MCC.*



Photo provided by Joplin Public Schools

This Joplin High School sign received damage during the tornado. Soon after a makeshift “H” and “E” were added to the sign, which became a symbol of hope.



# What the Tornado Could Not Destroy

The Joplin tornado of May 22, 2011, leveled St. Mary's Church and elementary school, but in the midst of suffering and devastation the cross still stood, a sign of hope for the entire community.

Steve Jones, the principal of St. Mary's school, and Gene Koester, the principal of McAuley Catholic High School, worked together to locate a new site for the school. Public school officials called and suggested sites.

An old warehouse owned by the Catholic high school was not considered at first, but then its potential was realized. In less than eight weeks the former grocery warehouse had an office, classrooms, coat hooks, and more.

Help came from throughout the community. High school football players from both the public high school and McAuley Catholic High School joined countless other volunteers to help with the move-in.

In view of Koester the cooperation forged among public and private schools before the tornado paved the way for a rapid response to the tragedy.

"We have always, for as long as I can remember, had a good relationship between public schools and private schools here in Joplin," he said.

For many years the public schools have provided special services to private school students, such as speech therapy and Title I remedial education.

For their part the Catholic schools helped public school superintendent C. J. Huff to launch and continue his services to assist at-risk students, the Bright Futures program.

That spirit of cooperation was vital in the days and weeks after the tornado. "If there was a person with something or able to help, they did," Koester said. "Even in the midst of the clean-up, it was about educating children. Not who did it."

Standing inside the entrance of the renovated warehouse that is the new St. Mary's School



The cross from the old St. Mary's Church and school remained standing after the tornado destroyed the school and church.

is a statue of the Virgin Mary brought intact from the leveled field of devastation at the old St. Mary's Church. There were some things the tornado simply could not destroy.

## How Public and Private Schools Can Work Together Locally

Public and private schools can be partners in teaching children and building up their local communities. In some communities this is already happening; in other communities, leadership is needed to initiate areas of cooperation. Here are a few suggestions of where to begin.

**Dual Enrollment:** Missouri already has a dual enrollment law (Section 167.031 RSMo.), which allows a child to enroll in classes in both a public and a private/parochial school. If a private school does not offer a certain course, say, Spanish, but the public school does, the student can enroll in that Spanish class and then return to the private school for the remainder of the school day. Conversely, a public school student can enroll in a religion class at a Catholic school and then return to the public school. All this is legal; it just takes planning and cooperation among local school officials.

**Virtual Schools:** Public and private schools can also cooperate through cyberspace with-

out moving any students around. Missouri law (Section 162.1250 RSMo) allows public school districts to set up their own virtual school. All resident children, including students in non-public schools, are eligible to participate. Is your local public school district offering courses through the Internet? If not, consider discussing the matter with district officials.

**Professional Development for Teachers:** Public and private school teachers at times attend the same professional development conferences at national, state and regional gatherings. Why not encourage more interchange at the local level? Have teachers teach each other, with more conversation and sharing of ideas between public and private school teachers. Meet at the public school one month and the private or parochial school the next month.

**Community Foundations:** Why not set up a foundation that will raise private donations to help both the local public school and private schools? Oh, yes, public schools get tax

money, but the unpopularity of tax increases is squeezing the budgets of public schools. A foundation could supplement the public monies received by public schools (perhaps financing a new computer or science lab). That same foundation could offer financial assistance to students who want to attend a private or parochial school.

**Public School Levies:** Finally, if the public school district is serving the community, the Catholic school leaders can support local school levies. This engenders good will and more cooperation. It can also give the public school the resources it needs to better serve all resident school children.

### MCC Thanks Knights of Columbus

The Missouri Catholic Conference would like to thank the Missouri Knights of Columbus for its continued generous support. The gift from the Knights makes it possible for the Missouri Catholic Conference to bring the *Messenger* to many Catholic households.