

“OLD BIRDS” TEACHING THE YOUNG: #2 PENCILS AND STANDARDIZED TESTS

“Boys and girls, please take out your #2 pencils.” A single sentence that made me cringe— **every** year! The dreaded #2 pencil. We all knew what it meant— it was time for **standardized testing**. On this Labor Day weekend, the thoughts of students and parents alike turn towards school. While many private (and increasingly public) schools begin before Labor Day, by tomorrow **all schools** will be in session. (Well, almost all. The Saint Paul public schools begin on Thursday). In person learning has returned. And oh, how too many of our children paid a stiff price these past **18 months**. This week, despite very strong feelings about education, I will try to avoid a polemical tone, and stick to facts. And the statistics are grim, with stark urban, suburban and rural differences.

Last week, while waiting for our return shuttle at the State Fair Park and Ride, my brother and I struck up a conversation with a young elementary school teacher from a first-tier suburban Minneapolis school district. His **zeal** for his students was **admirable** and palpable. His specialty area within education (EBD) requires tremendous **patience** and **resilience** and he admirably demonstrated the needed qualities. But he also **shed light** on the general landscape of his district. When we inquired about “distance learning,” he was so relieved that his school would offer an in-person experience in 2021-22. Last year was tremendously challenging, and he was transparent in **acknowledging** that if the students kept their cameras off, there was little the schools could do. Protocols prevented them from demanding to see their students. It is **nearly impossible** to teach virtually without benefit of making a personal connection.

I recall that one of my high school teachers had a sign on his desk that read: “Education is nothing more than old birds teaching young birds how to fly.” Perhaps he gleaned this from **C.S. Lewis**, who in his 1943 work entitled *The Abolition of Man*, remarked “The old dealt with its pupils as grown birds deal with young birds when they **teach them to fly** [emphasis added]; the new deals with them more as the poultry-keeper deals with young birds— making them thus or thus for purposes of which the birds know nothing. In a word, the old was a kind of propagation—men transmitting manhood to men; the new is merely propaganda.” Note that he wrote that during World War II. How **prescient** he was. As someone who spent **ten years** of my priestly life in a classroom, I’ve experienced both the **joys** and **challenges** of teaching.

Frankly, I am **appalled** that a small (but growing?) number of educators have caused harm to the art of teaching. Too often, teaching has devolved into little more than a vehicle for instilling ideology. Some brave students have filmed their teachers on rants, spewing vile diatribes against our nation’s founding principles or particular politicians. I do believe that **far more** teachers resemble the gentleman I encountered at the State Fair—zealous, engaging and passionate about his students. God bless him for the **care** he demonstrates for the good of the students entrusted to his care! However, the recent release of **test scores** from last year paints a troubling picture, a glaring indictment of “virtual” education. Only **53%** of **Minnesota** students met grade-level **reading** standards, and only **44%** of students met or exceeded **math** standards.

In fact, it is **even worse** than that. A **deeper dive** reveals even something more drastic about the annual **Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments**. Nearly 25% of MN students **opted out** of even taking the exam! In other words, it is possible that the results may have even been worse than listed above. In Brooklyn Center, **97%** of the students **opted out**; in Fridley 70% declined. That is **totally unacceptable**. Conversely, Lac Qui Parle Valley School District had a 96.7% test participation rate, Winona 81.3% and Elk River 87.8%. In fact, in 100 mostly rural districts, almost all the

students took the tests. What is different there? What is the moral of the story? Make no mistake—last year was a **wasted year** in far too many schools. Here in Saint Paul, while just over 50% took the test, **only 21%** of students met or exceeded state standards. In contrast, I suspect our **Catholic schools** fared quite well in comparison in their assessments.

While admittedly an outsider to our public education system, the **overarching influence** of some teacher **unions** cannot be ignored. It may be the single biggest factor— a **reluctance** to embrace protocols that could have given priority to safe in-person learning. And the **results show**. You can't learn if you aren't in school! Obviously, scores and participation rates vary according to demographics and have for years. Yet somehow, students must make up ground while being advanced to the next grade level. That will require **Herculean** efforts. My hope for this year is a **back-to-basics** approach that places emphasis on the fundamentals of learning. Enough already of teacher in-service days. We need good old-fashioned classrooms where the old birds simply **teach** the young ones **how to fly**. Period! This academic year, may all students be afforded the chance to thrive.

- Today's **mission appeal** is on behalf of **Fr. Mansuetus Setonga** from the Diocese of Same in **Tanzania**. **Special mission envelopes** are in the pews. We encourage your support. Your Sunday **stewardship** and mission appeal may both be placed in the drop boxes, provided they are in separate envelopes.
- Summer's fading quickly! Calling all families for religious education. Please visit the parish website with a [link to register](#) for Wednesday evening R.E. classes beginning on September 15. For those interested in exploring more about the Catholic faith, please consider signing up for RCIA.
- Our Cathedral Choir begins rehearsals this week. I myself have heard some pretty decent singing emanating from the pews. I know we have talent. Please consider putting it to greater use by joining our choir. Rehearsals take place on Wednesday evenings at 7:00 p.m.
- No lie—the newly elected leader of some 40 chaplains at Harvard University (Cambridge, MA) is an **atheist**. Technically a “humanist,” Greg Epstein is author of the book “Good without God.” By all accounts he is a kind man. But that's **not the point**, is it? A 2019 Harvard survey revealed that **twice as many** students identify as agnostic/atheist than 18-year-olds in the general population. Harvard's original (1692) motto— *Veritas Christo et Ecclesiae*— “Truth for Christ and the Church.” It was later shortened to “Veritas.”
- The Cathedral's loss— the Church's gain. **J.P. Thorton**, a valued member of our maintenance staff, is heading back to the seminary. He joined us last year, while stepping away from seminary formation for additional discernment. He has been a trusted and **diligent** staff member, interacting with so many visitors in a respectful and professional way. We promise our prayers as he prepares for ministry.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector