

# faith

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#### FEATURE STORY

BY JEFF HULETT

# WALKING AS ONE

## *Uniting the Catholic school system*

When Bishop David P. Talley hired Nic Antoine as superintendent of schools at the Catholic Diocese of Memphis in 2021, the bishop asked him to unite all of the schools within the diocese. It was time to create a cohesive, collaborative and complementary system that raises visibility and awareness for all.

From the Jackson Three, which includes St. Mary's School, Sacred Heart of Jesus High School, Holy Cross Catholic Preschool to Christian Brothers University, it was made clear that now was the time for all schools to come together, no matter their size, location or scope.

According to Antoine, he started meeting with leaders from all schools and asking the question, "Have you been called the best kept secret in Tennessee?"

He quickly followed by saying, "This year we are removing the mantra that we are the best kept secret. Now is the time to be unapologetically Catholic."

Antoine invited me to his office for a one-and-one conversation. The following is our discussion.

**JH:** For those who don't know, tell us about your role at the diocese? The day-to-day activities and overarching goals?

**NA:** There are 15 schools, and I am the superintendent. The pastors and principals lead our parochial schools. Our private

schools are led by their own administration and leadership. Our diocesan high school is led by principal Sondra Morris. I am not in charge of any school, but I am support personnel to all schools. I want everyone to know that I am accessible and that my door is always open.

**JH:** Uniting all the schools as one is an exciting goal. How do you hope to achieve that?

**NA:** Bishop Talley tasked me with creating a cohesive system of schools. So in my first year, the motto was "Don't Settle," and now in my second year the motto is "You Matter," which has helped us to engage the entire West Tennessee community. Without discounting previous hurts from the past, I led with the message that we are moving forward, and we are walking as one from now on. As each individual school strives to be the best, we need to work together. All of our schools should be communicating with one another and lifting each other up. Recently, St. Mary's School and Sacred Heart of Jesus High School did just that by teaming up to be feeder schools for one another. With the tagline, *One Family, Two Campuses, United in Faith*, I believe it's the model and template to bring all of our schools together.

**JH:** Can you tell me about last year and what you are most proud of? Also, the upcoming school year and what you hope to accomplish?

**NA:** I'm most proud that our schools remained open and in person and didn't experience any learning loss. In fact, our Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) scores were fantastic, with most of our





schools testing at or above grade level. I'm proud of the way we managed the pandemic safely and placed an emphasis on social development as well as academic success. Goals for the upcoming school year include operating at full capacity and strength and returning to pre-pandemic glory. The gloves are off, and we want parents to know that we are open for business and welcoming all children. In fact, 30 to 40 percent of [our] students are non-Catholic. I look forward to more social activities as well with athletics, fundraising and community events being front and center.

**JH:** Can you tell me about your new Twitter and YouTube presence?

**NA:** I'm now on Twitter and YouTube, and you can find me by searching "Super Speak." People can expect transparent communication, as it is key to personal and professional success. From parish and school events to athletics and Memphis-centric events, I look forward to sharing our work more broadly. Faith-wise, it allows me to provide a clear message that is informed by the Bible that all of our schools also stand by their faith. We are not perfect, but we are open to all. I want to support every child in the diocese.

**JH:** How can parents, teachers and students help the Catholic Diocese schools unite? What support can they offer?

**NA:** Remove the parking lot mafia. When I was working in Racine, Wis., there was a parent who called to my attention the other parents in the parking lot who were pointing fingers and

passing judgments. The eighth commandment speaks to rumor, innuendo and harming your neighbor. We are too often so ready to find fault that we miss the big picture, the positivity within. Removing the parking lot mafia refers to my open-door policy and encouraging parents to talk with me if they have any ideas, issues or advice. In the end, it's about working towards a goal of all of us going to heaven through stewardship and living the daily Catholic life. I'm all for promoting everything that's wonderful in the diocese – students, staff, teachers – bottom to top and living the faith life.

As for what's next, be on the lookout for the *Super Student Lives Here* campaign. Similar to Publisher's Clearing House with Ed McMahon, nominated students will be lifted up and celebrated once a month.

Stay tuned for more articles each month about all of the schools in the diocese. †

**"I am not in charge of any school, but I am support personnel to all schools. I want everyone to know that I am accessible and that my door is always open."**

**CATHOLIC SCHOOLS DAY** at AutoZone Park, featuring the Memphis Redbirds vs. The Norfolk Tides, will be held Saturday, September 10 at 3:05 p.m. Families can contact their school directly about acquiring tickets.

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