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ST. PAUL CATHOLIC SCHOOL CELEBRATES 75 YEARS OF SERVICE IN WHITEHAVEN

Enrollment on the rise thanks to committed alumni

BY JEFF HULETT

Since its founding in 1948 under the direction of the Sisters of Mercy, St. Paul Catholic School has been a vibrant, culturally rich and Christ-centered environment, open to all and committed to programs that ensure the spiritual, social and intellectual growth of each student in order to prepare him or her to be a faith-filled, academically confident, service-oriented leader in the Church and in the world.

But when enrollment began to fall a few years ago, school leaders weren't sure they could keep the doors open. That's right, not too long ago, St. Paul Catholic School in Whitehaven had trouble with enrollment numbers due to several factors, including many in the community thinking St. Paul closed when Bishop Byrne High School closed in 2013.

Fortunately, numbers are on the rise yet again thanks to a committed and passionate alumni board.

"Pre-COVID our numbers were down to 196, and we were worried," said St. Paul Catholic School Principal Sister Mary Lawrence Wright, a Dominican Sister of St. Cecilia. "We've always had great teachers and great programming, but we needed to increase enrollment so we could be sustainable."

Director of Admissions and Marketing Lawanda Thomas and Sister Mary Lawrence Wright reached out to parents for help. Over time numbers started to increase, and now they have 88 Pre-K students with a waiting list. To put that in perspective, there were only 38 Pre-K students just a few years ago.



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"Enrollment going up was my main goal when I took this role in July," said Thomas. "Capacity is 360 students, and we are now up to 302 students."

"It takes a team, it's not just one person," added Sister Mary Lawrence Wright.

And that team includes many passionate Panther alumni.

"I attended St. Paul from first grade through eighth grade. When I look back on those very formative years, one word jumps to mind – 'family.' Family was the core of everything at St. Paul," said proud alumni Paul Walker. "Parents and families were involved in every aspect of school and parish life. That example led me to my work in the church today in the Diocese of Memphis. It's also where I began my faith journey. Religion classes, daily prayer, the Dominican sisters, school Masses, and opportunities to be involved in the life of the Church all aided in building my young faith life and connected me to and excited me about the Catholic faith. I promise that even today I can name every teacher I had in my days at St. Paul because they were so pivotal to who I became as a person and as a man. I am always proud to share that I am a St. Paul Panther!"

St. Paul Catholic School is Pre-K through eighth grade and celebrated its first graduating class in 2020. Families are excited to have a place to go through eighth grade, according to Sister Mary Lawrence Wright. Adding two grades is something that helped with enrollment and filled a need in the community.

"It's better than it was pre-pandemic because of the parent involvement," said Sister Mary Lawrence Wright. "We aren't as separated as we were and have more events to see each other."

After the pandemic, the school did a needs assessment and looked closely at facilities and athletics.

"We now have a full-time athletic director and music performing arts director," said Thomas. "We just want people to know we are alive and well."

One of the greatest gifts is the rich variety of cultures. St. Paul Catholic School is incredibly diverse -55 percent African American, 30 percent Latino and 20 percent Irish travel families, as well as some families from Africa, Venezuela and Mexico.

Throughout the years, St. Paul Catholic School has been known for its outstanding academic

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- PAUL WALKER, ST. PAUL CATHOLIC SCHOOL ALUMNUS



program, successful athletic teams and focus on educating the whole child in an environment steeped in Catholic doctrine. Alumni from St. Paul Catholic School can be found in every walk of life, spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Today, St. Paul students continue to excel in academics, the fine arts, athletics and Christian service. Daily they are challenged to use their God-given gifts and talents to positively impact their families, communities, school and the world.

On the horizon, the school will launch a capital campaign next year to expand its footprint as it plans to raise \$18 million to renovate current properties and enhance programming. This three-to-five-year plan will tie into its 75th anniversary, and the school is asking all alumni to get involved. ✚



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