

Providing tuition assistance to students at Community of Saints Regional Catholic School

## Double Your Gift!

Donations to A&F&F Tuition Assistance Fund will be matched dollar-for-dollar through December 31, 2025.

See page 15 for details.

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BELOW: With your support, over 95% of COS families receive needed tuition assistance. We share some of their stories in the annual report.



FEATURE PHOTOS BY JEANNINE OF BLOCK PORTRAIT STUDIOS

## COS Students Outpace National Average for Growth in Math & Reading

A year ago, we reported impressive growth in reading skills for Community of Saints (COS) students in grades K-3. This year, there's even more good news to share. In 2025, standardized testing showed that COS students in grades K-8 significantly outpaced the national average for growth in reading and math.

For the last four years, COS has partnered with the national nonprofit, Achievement Network (ANet), to help boost student learning. Anna McKinney, ANet's Director of School Support, agrees the test results are a big deal. "The data shows that while an average student is expected to grow 100% during the school year, COS students exceeded that, growing 111% in reading and 107% in math," said McKinney. "That's quite a bit over the average. I don't see many schools get above the 95% to 105% range."

McKinney explains that measuring student growth reveals how much progress students on all points of the achievement spectrum made, from the low end to the high end. "If you really want to see if instruction is working, student growth tells you whether that teacher made a difference with that student over the course of the year."

ANet partners with schools serving low-income student populations to help provide the resources and support each student needs to succeed academically. Over the last few years, ANet has helped COS identify and implement new curriculums across all grades for math and language arts.

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## MESSAGE FROM **Father Paul**

### Dear Alums, Friends, and Families,

When Fr. Steve Adrian asked me to be the Canonical Administrator of Community of Saints School (and Archbishop Hebda, who appointed me, agreed), I honestly did not know how I could fit it into an already busy ministry life. I also knew I could not say “no.” It has turned out to be one of the great blessings of my priestly ministry over these last couple of years. Just walking through the doors and being greeted by whoever is in the hallways — usually with little smiles and bright eyes — lifts the spirit. Working with Bridget Kramer and the whole leadership team, including the board and other supporters, has been wonderful.

One of the greatest joys is celebrating weekly Mass with the students, teachers, parents, grandparents, and other guests. As I walk into the church, the choir is practicing, and someone shouts out, “Hi, Fr. Paul from St. Paul!” That’s how I introduced myself at my first school Mass. Then, as the classes walk in, I offer a greeting; there is about a 50/50 chance they’ll greet me back. They are not being rude — they are simply focused and excited to be walking in and looking for their pew. It is also a joy to watch our eighth graders guide their kindergarten “buddies” to their seats. These small acts of leadership and care speak volumes about the kind of disciples our students are becoming — growing in kindness, patience, and witness.

During the homily, I like to ask the students questions. Their answers — often wise, sometimes funny, and always sincere — never fail to inspire me. You can see their faith growing in real time.

The joy of these children is contagious — it’s like a good cup of coffee in the morning: it warms you, energizes you, and reminds you that God is present in simple, everyday encounters. Community of Saints is truly living its name — a community filled with saints in the making, shining with the light of Christ as they grow in faith, hope, and love, while growing in virtue and knowledge that will help them flourish as children, teenagers, and beyond.

— Fr. Paul Treacy



The joy of these children is contagious — it’s like a good cup of coffee in the morning: it warms you, energizes you, and reminds you that God is present in simple, everyday encounters.”

— FR. PAUL TREACY

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The Good News | Fall/Winter 2025



PHOTO BY JEANNINE OF BLOCK PORTRAIT STUDIOS

## MESSAGE FROM PRINCIPAL BRIDGET KRAMER

On August 27th, while COS staff were meeting to prepare for the new school year, we learned of the heartbreaking tragedy at Annunciation. In response, our staff immediately gathered in the church to pray, and Father Paul led us in a solemn and comforting Mass.

Our hearts remain with the Annunciation community as they continue to heal. We are inspired and filled with hope as we witness how the Catholic community — and so many beyond — have come together to support and walk alongside one another through this unthinkable time.

As Annunciation Principal DeBoer courageously reminded us, “When you pray, move your feet.”

## COS Students Outpace National Average for Growth in Math & Reading, continued from page 1

Principal Bridget Kramer says her focus is on keeping standards and expectations high while giving students the support they need. Recent test scores validate the school's approach. "All too often, low income students and students of color fall behind academically because they were never exposed to rigorous, grade level work," she said. "It's a real disservice to students when instruction gets watered down."

### Curriculum Reflects Latest Research on Reading Instruction

After implementing a new phonics curriculum for grades K-2 in 2023, last year ANet helped COS introduce a new English Language Arts curriculum for grades 3-5. Third grade teacher, Alex Gergen, said her students love reading the stories that cover a wide variety of interesting topics, ranging from science to social studies, history to technology. "We just finished a unit about ocean survival and now we're reading about the Yupik people in Alaska," said Gergen.

Gergen, who recently earned her master's degree from the University of St. Thomas with a focus on K-12 reading, explained that the new curriculum reflects the latest research about reading instruction. By introducing

students to so many different subjects and ideas, the curriculum expands their knowledge of the world, which is critical to achievement. "Background knowledge has a huge impact on how kids test," said Gergen. "If you take a reading test about a topic you know nothing about, and the vocabulary is new to you, you're not going to understand what you read nearly as well. This curriculum doesn't just build foundational reading skills, it increases students' knowledge banks."

### Peer Coaching Drives Student Achievement

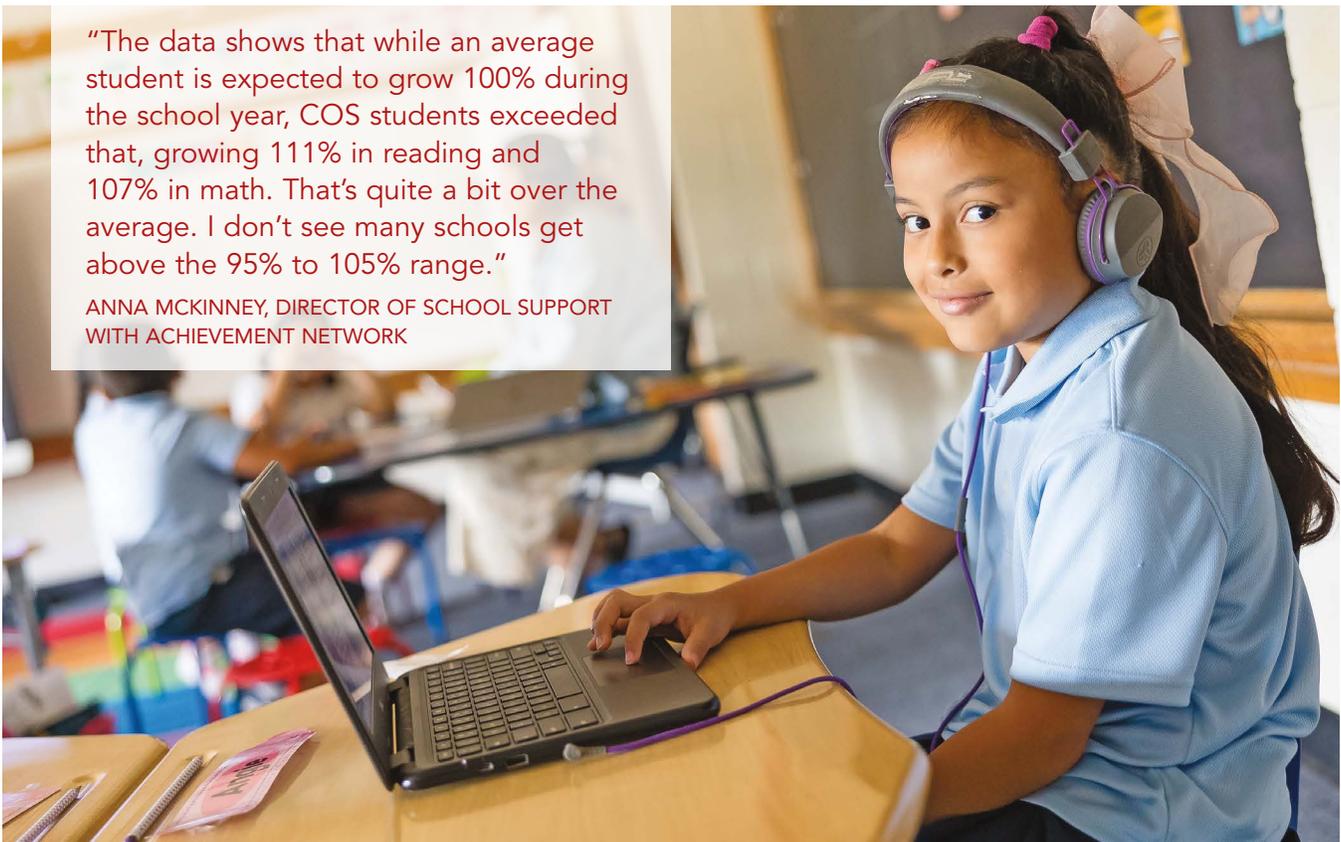
Students in grades 3-5 also showed impressive gains in writing skills, another goal teachers had with the new curriculum. Gergen credits the school's approach to peer coaching, a process where teachers observe and provide feedback to one another to improve their skills and practices.

COS launched peer coaching when the school first partnered with the University of Notre Dame in 2020. While it's not a new idea in education, fourth grade teacher and peer coach leader, Jenna Cosgrove, said the school has developed an exceptional model that teachers embrace. "Peer coaching at COS has evolved into a

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"The data shows that while an average student is expected to grow 100% during the school year, COS students exceeded that, growing 111% in reading and 107% in math. That's quite a bit over the average. I don't see many schools get above the 95% to 105% range."

ANNA MCKINNEY, DIRECTOR OF SCHOOL SUPPORT WITH ACHIEVEMENT NETWORK



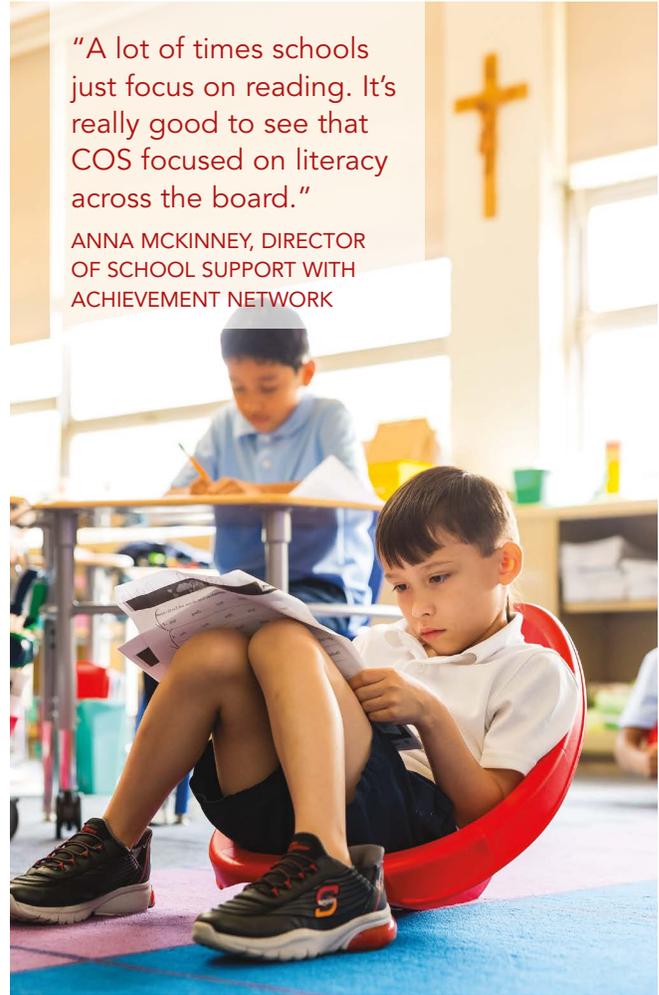
**COS Students Outpace National Average for Growth in Math & Reading,**  
*continued from page 3*

program that gives teachers the space to learn from each other,” said Cosgrove. “It is one of the factors driving student achievement.”

To improve their students’ writing skills, teachers in grades 3-5 met regularly to compare notes about what was working with their students and what wasn’t. They reviewed students’ writing samples and swapped ideas for classroom instruction. “We’d talk about things like — this student continues to struggle, does anyone else have an idea to help them?” Gergen said. “Even though it was just me teaching the third graders, it really was a whole team effort.”

Anna McKinney thinks it’s noteworthy that COS students made gains in both writing and reading. “Since there’s no standardized assessment for writing, a lot of times schools just focus on reading,” said McKinney. “It’s really good to see that COS focused on literacy across the board.”

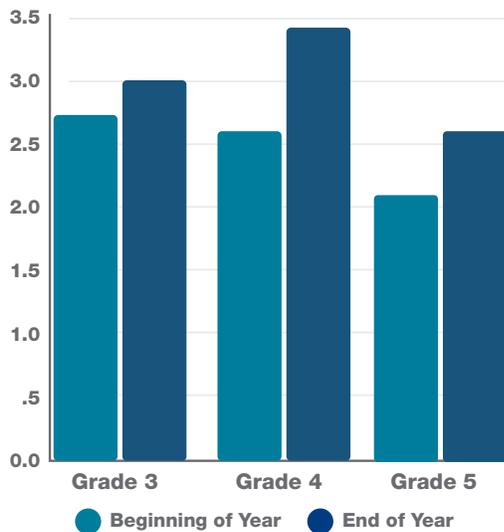
Gergen has taught at COS for ten years, and she admits it’s a lot of work to move the needle on student growth, but seeing the results keeps her motivated. “I had a student who is a multilingual learner — she speaks Spanish at home. At the end of the year, I let her compare her writing from the beginning of the year to her writing at the end, and she was so proud,” Gergen said, smiling. “Students who are struggling can get so down on themselves, and when they feel that confidence, something clicks. As a teacher, it’s the best feeling.”



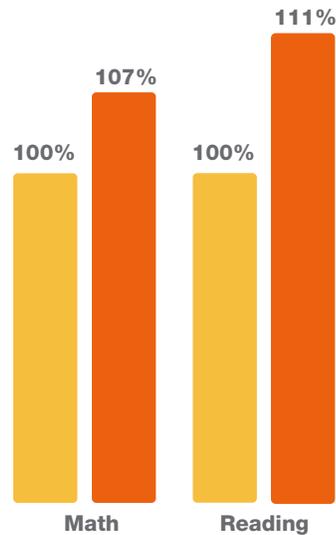
“A lot of times schools just focus on reading. It’s really good to see that COS focused on literacy across the board.”

ANNA MCKINNEY, DIRECTOR OF SCHOOL SUPPORT WITH ACHIEVEMENT NETWORK

**Class Average Score for Writing (on a 4.0 Scale)**  
 Scores were based on student’s focus, organization and ability to use evidence in their writing assignments.



**Annual Growth in Math and Reading at COS Outpaces Typical National Growth**  
 (according to iReady)



## Whatever It Takes

# Supporting Students and Families Helps Boost Achievement

To achieve the test results Community of Saints saw last year takes more than rigorous academic instruction. COS has one of the highest rates for students who qualify for free and reduced lunch in the Archdiocese, which means the school needs to go beyond the classroom to boost achievement. Here is a closer look at some of the services the school provides to help students succeed.

## ➔ Connecting Families to Critical Resources

Financial hardship is probably the largest and most stubborn obstacle to student achievement. When a family is struggling with issues like housing insecurity, food insecurity, or access to health care, it's much more difficult for a child to keep up in school, much less excel.

Since 2016, COS has supported school families through its partnership with City Connects, a nonprofit established by Boston College. The program is based on evidence that shows how meeting a child's needs outside the classroom improves academic outcomes.

COS has an onsite City Connects coordinator who gathers information about what kind of support each student needs to be set up for success. The support can be anything, from helping families access resources to pay their electric bill, to finding student scholarships for summer programs. "After I learn about each student, I find programs or resources to help them grow or to fill gaps they might have," explained Rose Junko, the City Connects coordinator at COS.

The coordinator also brings outside services into the school, like those offered by Every Meal, a nonprofit that fights hunger by filling food gaps children experience when they're away from school on the weekends and over the summer. During the school year, 39 COS families receive bags of groceries every Friday to help them get through the weekend, and the number is rising.

The coordinator also arranged for a free dental clinic, Ready Set Smile, to visit the school annually. "We have students who had never seen a dentist," said COS principal, Bridget Kramer. "Even with dental insurance, the cost is more than some families can afford."

**Rose Junko, City Connects Coordinator at COS.**



Many school families also lack access to vision care, so in 2024, the City Connects coordinator developed a partnership with Helen Keller International to provide free vision screenings, eye exams, and prescription glasses to students. Last year, over 100 COS students were screened for vision and 17 students received free glasses.



When Helen Keller International visited COS in October 2025, **95 students** received **FREE VISION SCREENINGS**. Follow up exams led to **18 students** receiving **FREE PRESCRIPTION GLASSES**.

**HELEN KELLER INTERNATIONAL** is a nonprofit organization dedicated to preventing blindness among vulnerable populations worldwide. Their "Saving Sight" program provides free vision screenings, eye exams, and prescription glasses, particularly focusing on underserved children.

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**Heather Dopkins**  
(pictured on right)  
has been a full-time  
counselor at COS  
since 2022.

## ➔ School Counselor Contributes to Learning Environment

Supporting students mental and emotional well-being is another priority at COS. COS is currently one of the only Catholic elementary schools in the Archdiocese to have a full-time school counselor on staff. Teachers, families, and students all agree that Heather Dopkins' role as counselor at COS contributes to a calm and harmonious school environment that's more conducive to learning.

A student might seek help or be referred to Dopkins for any number of reasons. COS students face the same challenges children everywhere face, such as dealing with a divorce, or family members who struggle with mental illness, alcoholism, or drug addiction. COS students who live in poverty are more likely to have additional challenges, such as housing instability or exposure to violence. The recent escalation in deportations has also upended the lives of some students, leaving them to deal with the emotional loss of a family member, an event that may be aggravated by the loss of family income.

Dopkins said that any of these issues can lead to struggles with trauma, anxiety, depression, self-harm, or other disruptive behaviors. "Every teacher at COS has a really good pulse on their students," said Dopkins "They are the first to let me know if a student seems down, withdrawn, or if they see a change in behavior."

In addition to counseling students individually, Dopkins also works with groups of students. For instance, when a student has trouble making friends, Dopkins can help them get traction with a new friend group. "Students who are shy, have social anxiety, or just need a boost of confidence, I may introduce them to a

group of really social kids and we get together and play games," she said. "We play a lot of UNO and just have fun. It's a way to foster those relationships so they can take root."

Dopkins also intervenes when friendships hit rough patches. "I probably deal with that every day," said Dopkins. "For friend groups that have a lot of conflict, we focus more on effective communication. We talk about things like, when this person said this to you, how did that make you feel?"

While disagreements among young people are common, Dopkins says they can take a significant toll, especially at a time when conflicts can be magnified on social media. "Having a place where students can go to talk about these things is important because when it's left unsaid it doesn't resolve or heal. And that's where anxiety and other problems can occur."

Creating a culture of kindness is at the heart of Dopkins' work at COS and is one of the reasons she advocated for adopting the Character Strong curriculum several years ago. The curriculum, which encourages students to be kind, be strong, and be well, is another tool for building community and educating the whole child.

After morning prayers each day, teachers use the curriculum to lead short discussions about specific ways to promote positive social interactions, with a different theme every month. "When we talk about kindness, it's a whole month looking at how to be kind to others," explained Dopkins, adding that Character Strong is very much in line with Catholic values.

## ➔ Ensuring Multilingual Learners Excel

It's not unusual for schools to provide additional instruction for students whose primary language or the language spoken at home isn't English; what is unusual is the high percentage of students at COS who are multilingual learners. Nearly half of COS students qualify as multilingual learners, one of the highest percentages in the Archdiocese.

For the past four years, Sarah Lindsey has been the multilingual teacher at COS, and she is quick to praise the capabilities of her students.

"The bilingual mind has more connections between different hemispheres of the brain," Lindsey said. "That makes these kids better problem solvers because their mind has always had that flexibility."

The challenge for multilingual students is making sure they have the writing, reading, and listening skills they need to excel in school.

"There are kids who sound fluent in English, who have the social language skills to play and interact with their peers, but if they didn't receive multilingual services, they'd be struggling in school," she said. "Kids need to be able to read and write to be successful."

Lindsey works with students to make sure they master the academic vocabulary they'll need in classes. She also coordinates with teachers so she knows what lessons are coming up and can prepare her students.



ABOVE: Nearly half of COS students qualify as multilingual learners, one of the highest percentages in the Archdiocese.



LEFT: For the past four years, Sarah Lindsey has taught multilingual students at COS.

"I do a lot of pre-teaching with students, so they know what to expect and are ready to learn," she said.

Lindsey, who often teaches the same students for multiple years, gets to know them and their stories, which run from hard to joyful. "Working with children really pushes us to be our best," she said. "This school does a good job of making sure that kids have a safe place and know they belong, that right here is their home."

### COS 2025-26 DEMOGRAPHICS

The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has designated COS as one of 10 Drexel Mission Schools. To qualify, a school must serve a minimum of 50% students of color, have 50% of students who qualify for the national Free and Reduced Lunch, and enroll a minimum of 100 students.

76%  
FREE AND  
REDUCED  
LUNCH

90%  
CATHOLIC

87%  
STUDENTS  
OF COLOR

96%  
RECEIVE  
TUITION  
ASSISTANCE

43%  
MULTI-  
LANGUAGE  
LEARNERS

43  
PRESCHOOLERS

184  
K-8  
STUDENTS

# Removing Barriers & Changing Lives

821 Donations Totaling \$403,270

Schools with demographics similar to Community of Saints (COS) encounter some hefty obstacles to academic success, so when I heard last year’s standardized tests showed COS students learning at an accelerated rate, I wanted to share that news. I also took the opportunity to look at what it takes to get those results. Everyone knows classroom instruction is crucial to student achievement. The extra lift at COS is meeting students’ needs beyond the classroom.

In a faith-based, loving and safe environment, COS constantly strives to remove barriers to academic achievement and create opportunities for all students to develop their unique, God-given talents. Your generous gifts to Alums & Friends & Families make this important work possible. At COS, where 96% of students receive financial assistance, your donations are truly changing the lives of children and their families. **Thank you for your continued support.**

— Maggie Lee, Editor

Donations listed were received between July 1, 2024 and June 30, 2025.

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Right to left: **Elba Rivera, Victoria Suarez in 7th grade, Carlos Suarez, and Micaela Suarez, 4 years old.**

**RIVERA-SUAREZ FAMILY**  
**"We Found a Community"**

Elba Rivera was born and raised in Puerto Rico, and she recalls life there was difficult. The lack of good-paying jobs, the constant threat from hurricanes, and the unreliability of basic services like electricity, were among the reasons she moved to Minnesota in 2011. For the first few months, Elba, along with her partner and their one-year old daughter, Victoria, lived with her aunt who had a home on the West Side.

Elba's sister had also made the move, and one day, after Mass at Our Lady Guadalupe, she told Elba she'd heard about scholarships that were available to send children to Catholic school. "I thought that was amazing," said Elba, whose daughter was in kindergarten at the time. "As soon as we knew, we moved Victoria to COS for first grade."

Victoria is now in seventh grade and Elba couldn't be happier with her experience. She is quick to list all the things she loves about the school. "The quality of education, the quality of those teachers and the principal," she said. "And the community! It just all feels like a family."

Elba also appreciates the extra effort the school puts towards creating a positive culture. She recalled how a few years ago, some conflicts emerged among students in Victoria's class. The school addressed the problem quickly. "The counselor came and they created Club Kindness," explained Elba. "I think it's transformed the kids because now they're in seventh grade and it's really different. There's no drama anymore. It's been wonderful."

Sending her daughter to Catholic school has filled a hole that Elba wasn't even aware existed. "I grew up with the Catholic faith, and when you have your own kids, you want to pass on the same values," Elba explained. "When we moved here, we felt like something was missing. Then, we enrolled her in Community of Saints — through Victoria, we found a community."

† Deceased

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## HUERTA BUENO FAMILY "My Prayers Were Answered"

In 2022, when the oldest of Myra Huerta Bueno's three children was 8 years old, she noticed a dramatic change in his behavior. "He became very aggressive, which wasn't like him," she said. "I kept asking him, 'what's going on?'"

When Pedro came home from school with a black eye, he finally admitted to his mom that he was being bullied by a classmate. Even after talking to school officials, Myra didn't feel her son was safe.

A friend she confided in asked if she'd ever thought of sending her children to Catholic school. Myra felt with three children, Catholic school was out of reach, but her friend, who had two children at COS, assured her the school would help with tuition. "She said, 'I love it, Myra, and I promise you're going to love it, too.'"

When Myra got a call from COS saying they could take all three of her children, she began crying. "My prayers were answered," she said. "It was so hard seeing my boy going through all this."

As soon as Myra's children were enrolled, Pedro began meeting with the school counselor. "They took action right away," said Myra. "We got help immediately." Within a few weeks, she noticed a change in her son's behavior. "He went back to being Pedro, the boy I knew,"



**Myra and Daniel Huerta Bueno with their three children, Pedro in 7th grade, Mia in 4th grade, and Emilio in 6th grade. They are members of Our Lady of Guadalupe.**

she said. "He told me everybody at school is nice. He feels safe."

Myra was also pleased to see the impact COS had on her children's faith. A few months after her daughter, Mia, joined the COS kindergarten class, she began reminding the family to pray before meals. "Mia would say, 'We can't start eating. We all have to give thanks to God,'" said Myra with a smile. "And the excitement, the happiness when my kids made their First Communion. They were super excited."

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## MATA FAMILY "I Thought — We've Got to Do This"

Oly Mata remembers her decision to switch schools, back when her oldest child, Nathan, was going into third grade. Oly lives across the street from COS and sending her kids to a school they could walk to appealed to her, but it wasn't the biggest reason.

"I came and toured the school and compared it to where Nathan was going at the time, and I really liked it," Oly recalled. "I felt like it was more caring, more loving. It was a good environment. I thought, okay, we've got to do this."

Oly's daughter is now a fifth grade student at COS while her two sons have both graduated and attend Two Rivers High School in Mendota Heights. Back when Nathan was a freshman in high school, Oly was worried about the change in schools. "For his whole childhood, he went to school with the same group of kids and then suddenly he has hundreds of kids in his class."

Oly realizes now she didn't need to worry. This year Nathan is a junior at Two Rivers, and he has grown into a disciplined student. Early on, he developed the habit of going to school before classes began, whenever he needed help. His diligence paid off. "We learned recently that because of Nathan's GPA for ninth and tenth grade, he will receive an academic letter award," Oly said proudly, adding that Nathan has also helped his younger brother make the transition to high school.

Oly believes COS did a good job preparing her sons to succeed in high school and she's confident it'll be the same with her daughter. "If she's struggling with something, they tell me right away," Oly said. "They don't just let it pass. I like the communication."

While Oly and her husband both work, the tuition assistance was crucial. "At the time, my husband was self-employed, so we couldn't count on the same income every month," she said. "Without the financial assistance, I don't think my kids would have been able to go."



Oly and Pedro Mata's two sons, Nathan and Mason, graduated from COS and are students at Two Rivers High School. Their daughter, Natalie, is in 5th grade at COS.

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