

INTERVIEW WITH KATHY MEARS, INTERIM CEO OF THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXTRAITS:

- “I took the first job offered to me, and it was in a Catholic school. I fell in love with the care that teachers and school leaders showed to their students... In Catholic schools, I saw that communities were built on faith and family, and children were expected to be contributing members.”
- “[During the pandemic] I also have seen our teachers and school leaders go above and beyond the call of duty. They worked to make sure that their students had food and internet. They drove by their students’ homes so that they could see each other, and they spent hours beyond the traditional school day meeting with students one on one, to ensure that they were learning.”

You are the interim CEO of the National Catholic Educational Association in the United States. Could you explain the origin and goals of the organization?

The National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) was founded in St. Louis in 1904 to promote Catholic education and to provide professional learning for its members. Today, NCEA works with the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops (USCCB) to advocate for Catholic schools and to raise awareness of Catholic schools and the work that our dedicated teachers and school leaders do each day. In addition, we provide professional development for our schools on a variety of topics, collect data as requested by the USCCB and work to bring Catholic educators together to exchange ideas, build professional learning networks and to pray and worship together. NCEA does its work with both virtual and in person events.

What are the main activities of NCEA today? And how is the organization doing?

NCEA is doing well, advocating for our members and spreading the good news of Catholic education. NCEA’s website, NCEA.org is an interactive tool for leaders and educators and provides a place for sharing and learning.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, Kathy Mears, the Interim CEO of the National Catholic Educational Association in the United States explains the role of the organization. She also shares how teachers and staff have responded to the pandemic, and what led her to pursue a career in service to Catholic schools.

Visit us at www.GlobalCatholicEducation.org.

NCEA continues to research and publish its Annual Statistical Report of Schools, Enrollment and Staffing. In addition, NCEA has been on Capitol Hill during the last session, monitoring public policy that will impact our students and teachers. We worked with the USCCB to provide information to legislators, influencing their decision making in as many ways as possible to provide for our students and teachers. NCEA also sponsors our national Catholic Schools Week¹, this year, January 31-February 6, 2021.



Photo: Kathy Mears with Cardinal Sean and students when she was superintendent for Boston Catholic schools.

What are the main challenges and opportunities that Catholic schools face in the US, and how does NCEA help?

Catholic schools in the United States are facing declining enrollment and lack of financial resources. NCEA attempts to assist schools with ideas about how to plan for smaller enrollments and how to tell their stories of success. NCEA provides professional development on how to integrate the teachings of the Church into all aspects of the curriculum and instruction, as well as how to market Catholic education in local communities. In addition, NCEA offers leadership programs, specific to Catholic schools and the tasks that Catholic school leaders face.

Is there a particular story or event that you witnessed in 2020 that gave you inspiration and that you would like to share?

Our Catholic schools pivoted so quickly following the lockdown that occurred throughout the United States. Most of our schools did not miss more than a day of instruction as teachers and school leaders worked to provide quality educational experiences online.

I also have seen our teachers and school leaders go above and beyond the call of duty. They worked to make sure that their students had food and internet. They drove by their students' homes so that they could see each other, and they spent hours beyond the traditional school day meeting with students one on one, to ensure that they were learning.

Finally, our schools planned extensively in order to safely reopen. They continue to clean their classrooms, teach their students the importance of social distancing and work as hard to keep everyone safe, as they do to provide quality Catholic education for their students. They do it with smiles and grace and they do it because of how much they care for their students.

What is your own personal journey? How did you come to work on Catholic education?

I took the first job offered to me, and it was in a Catholic school. I fell in love with the care that teachers and school leaders showed to their students and wanted to be part of a group that was teaching students not just reading, writing and arithmetic, but also about Jesus. In Catholic schools, I saw that communities were built on faith and family, and children were expected to be contributing members of that community. I was also afforded the opportunity to do what was right for children and that included learning how to teach students with learning differences. I was encouraged to start programs for these students to meet their needs. These things, coupled with the academic excellence that was offered by my colleagues and me, convinced me that this is where my life's work would be most rewarding, where I could truly make a difference.

Could you share with our readers a personal anecdote about your passions, your interests?

When I first started teaching, I was given a first-grade classroom. I wasn't really sure how to teach children to read, so I spent the summer before school started, reading everything that I could, in order to learn all about how to best teach my students. About six weeks into my first school year, I realized I had a student who was not learning to read. Despite my best efforts and the efforts of her family, she wasn't progressing. The next year, I again had another student who didn't progress as the other children did. At that time, I made a decision to focus on learning how to teach children who didn't learn through the conventional instructional methods that I knew. Those experiences lead me to earn a master's that focused on special education and I have spent my career bringing Catholic education to all students.

¹ A number of resources to participate are available at https://www.ncea.org/csw/Home_Page/CSW/Catholic_Schools_Week.aspx.