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Charism, Culture, Curriculum

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Catholic education has had a difficult decade. Over the past 10 years, 23 percent of U.S. Catholic schools closed or consolidated, and the number of students attending them also declined by 23 percent. But Susan Ferguson, executive director of the Center for Catholic Education, wants to reignite the fire that fuels Catholic education and inspire teachers to do the same.

"Charism, Culture and Curriculum," this year's theme of the third-annual Catholic Education Summit on the University of Dayton campus, will pool the University's resources to support students, teachers, administrators and scholars for the future of Catholic education.

On July 14, attendees will network while learning from the keynote address, a variety of presenters, facilitated conversations and opportunities to develop action steps toward sustaining Catholic education.

"Charism, culture and curriculum are what distinguish Catholic schools as Catholic, and each one has a kind of personality that's established by those things and how they're integrated," Ferguson said. "When families make the choice for their children to attend a Catholic school, this personality serves as an invitational — this is who we are as Catholic educators."

While each year's summit focused on a different theme, Ferguson acknowledged the growth and flexibility that is necessary to provide the best Catholic education possible, right from the start. It began with local partnerships the University holds with the Center for Early Learning and the Institute for Pastoral Initiatives, when she realized, "We have something great here, why don't we do something about it and start sharing it with others?"

With the help of a Better Way grant and the National Catholic Educational Association, they have shared it far and wide. During the 2012 and 2013 summits, more than 400 educators, philanthropists, legislators and supporters from countries around the world have gathered virtually and on campus, and this year will be no different.

"Collaboration, partnerships and networking have been the core of this initiative, it just needed to grow," Ferguson said. "We wanted to bring together as many ideas as possible, and collectively consider, 'What do the students need right now?'"

As Marianist founder Blessed William Joseph Chaminade encouraged, they read the signs of the times, Ferguson said.

"We should not change our core mission, but we must peer creatively into the future and think about how we can continue to deliver a great Catholic education in the 21st century," said Jim Rigg, superintendent of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. "An absolutely critical component of building a bright future is the recruitment, training, and ongoing formation of school leaders. We need principals, pastors, and other leaders who are energetic, creative, and courageous. Schools cannot succeed without strong leaders, and our future will be built upon the visions of those who lead."

The past two years cultivated awareness and emphasized partnership opportunities, and explored ways to meet the needs of all learners in urban Catholic education. As this year's summit approaches, Ferguson said she has high hopes for the future of the program, and for the future of Catholic Education.

"I want you to be inspired to help grow, flourish, and improve Catholic education," she said in acknowledgement of all summit attendants. "I hope you understand the value in doing so. I want you to leave feeling like you're on fire, like you can't wait to make a difference, because you can."

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