



Heart of the Community: A Brief History of Waterloo Region's Catholic Schools

By John P. Shewchuk
(With files from Sr. Mary Joan Helm, SSND and Fr. Jim Wahl, C.R.)

In the 21st century, with the world's popular culture changing almost minute by minute, it's a bold statement for any school system of any educational bent or religious denomination to claim its schools are at the very "*heart of the community*" they serve.

It's an even bolder statement to say those same schools offer "*success for each*" and "*a place for all*".

But that's what Waterloo Region's Catholic Schools have been doing since 1836.

In 2011 Waterloo Region's Catholic Schools marked 175 years of Catholic education in Waterloo Region (known as Waterloo County prior to 1973).

To put that number in proper historical perspective, consider this:

When Waterloo Region's first Catholic schools were founded, Victoria was still a year away from beginning her 63 year reign as Queen – and the country we now call Canada would not be born for another 31 years.

Andrew Jackson was President of the United States. There have been 37 presidents since.

Our students have studied during the reigns of a dozen different Popes and all nine Bishops of Hamilton.

Our schools have excelled under the governments of all two dozen Premiers of Ontario and every Prime Minister of Canada.

Indeed, when our first schools opened, the founding of the Catholic Diocese of Hamilton itself lay two decades in the future.

While the history of Catholic education in Waterloo Region is rich enough to fill volumes on its own, understanding the impact and importance of our local Catholic schools means first understanding the evolution of the Region itself.

Waterloo Region began taking shape in 1784 when Britain granted the Six Nations a tract of land six miles deep on both sides of the Grand River along its entire length in gratitude for their support during the American Revolutionary War.

The rich farmland bordering the river and the promise of peace for war-weary people eager to leave the new United States of America was obviously quite attractive and by 1798 the lands had begun to be sold to an influx of newcomers.

The majority of the pioneers were of German Pennsylvanian background or new arrivals from Scotland, and their settlements took firm hold.

A solid foundation had been laid. But who would build upon it?

By 1822, the answer was becoming clear as more land became available and word of the hospitable new community spread. A new wave of settlers began to arrive in the area – this time from the German-speaking European regions of Alsace, Prussia, Bavaria and the Rhineland.

These new settlers introduced the Catholic and Lutheran religions to the area.

And with the introduction of Catholicism came an urgent need for churches and schools.

Father Jim Wahl, C.R., noted historian of the Congregation of the Resurrection, places the creation of a school in St. Agatha in 1835-36.

“A log building, it housed both Catholic and Protestant students and served as a church and a quarters for priests. Not until 1854 was a more permanent stone structure built until it was replaced by another building attached to the orphanage in 1875, which was enlarged in 1890 and is the site of the present [St. Agatha] school”.

Sister Mary Joan Helm, SSND, archivist for the School Sisters of Notre Dame, notes that at same time the new school in St. Agatha was taking shape, another new school in New Germany (now Maryhill) was founded. According to a detailed history of the SSND's Canadian Province the settlers *“held fast to their religion because they lived in the area of the same circuit visited by the Redemptorist and Jesuit priests who laid the foundation of the Catholic communities in the orbit of St. Agatha and Berlin. Their first church/school built in 1836, was a very small log structure which was replaced in 1848 by a sturdy stone building fifty by sixty feet dedicated to St. Boniface”.*

So, humbly, began the story of Catholic education in Waterloo Region.

Seventeen and a half decades later, St. Agatha and St. Boniface Catholic Elementary Schools still exist.

A third Catholic school, located in St. Clements, opened in 1840 – followed by another in Preston (now Cambridge) in 1847.

In 1857, an energetic Jesuit, Father George Laufhuber, was appointed the first priest in Berlin (Kitchener), and arranged his living quarters in a small room in a partitioned corner of the church.

He soon persuaded the parish congregation to build a sacristy onto the church and a modest one and a half storey rectory nearby.

As recorded by the School Sisters of Notre Dame, *“to the puzzlement of the members, he occupied only the small low ceilinged upper storey of the rectory and left the ground floor as one large room. They soon understood why”.*

The empty space became a classroom in 1859 when, having failed to persuade the SSND's to establish a presence in Berlin, he hired a Catholic layman from nearby New Germany as the teacher at his new St. Mary's School. He arranged to have the requisite three School Trustees elected (of which he was one) and the government recognized St. Mary's as the first separate school in Berlin.

In 1874, Mother Caroline, heeding a request from St. Jerome's College founder Father Louis Funcken, C.R. finally brought the School Sisters of Notre Dame to the area -- and local Catholic schools took on a brand new dimension.

To say life was difficult for those first teaching Sisters would be a mild understatement.

According to an SSND history, *“Father Louis Funcken came to St. Agatha to welcome them and escort them to Berlin. They had supper at the College (St. Jerome's) and were taken to the former St. Mary's rectory/school that they had been told would be furnished as a convent for their immediate occupancy.*

They found it to be a little one and a half storey house with the first floor divided into four small rooms. These were to be their parlour, kitchen, dining/community room and chapel. The upstairs was divided into four smaller

rooms whose low ceilings would make their sleeping quarters very hot and cramped. The house was scantily furnished with one chest of drawers (a gift from Father Funcken), six chairs, one old bed, and three tables. A stove in the dining room was their only source of heat. There was no kitchen stove, no dishes, and no food supplies. The first night in St. Mary's convent, the sisters slept on their straw mattresses on the floor.

Their salaries (\$300 annually) would not commence until the end of their first three teaching months”.

Despite these hardships, when the first public inspection of the school was made in 1875 there were 120 students and the Berlin Journal gushed: *“The cleanliness of the classrooms, the discipline, and the good manners—all filled the visitors with admiration. The demonstration lessons were interspersed with declamations and vocal music admirably rendered.... The entire program was most gratifying.”*

While it may be said the *School Acts* of 1841, 1843 and 1850 were the key ingredients in allowing Catholic education to take firm root in the area, it was passage of the British North America Act in 1867 that guaranteed it would flourish -- by granting Roman Catholics in Ontario the right to their own Catholic schools.

With the seeds of Catholic education already sown by the pioneering local schools and the visionary priests and sisters who gave them life, it was only a matter of time until Catholic schools blossomed everywhere.

The legendary St. Jerome's High School was founded in St. Agatha in 1864 and moved to Berlin in 1866, joined in 1907 by the Catholic girl's convent school that would become St. Mary's High School in 1930.

By 1968, there were independent Catholic School Boards operating in Kitchener, Waterloo, Galt, Preston, Hespeler, Bridgeport, New Hamburg, Maryhill, St. Agatha, Linwood, Elmira and St. Clements.

These independent Boards all ceased to exist on January 1, 1969, when the Ontario Legislature amalgamated them into one Board – the Waterloo County Separate School Board. School Inspector John Sweeney, who would go on to represent Waterloo Region in the Ontario Legislature and as a member of the provincial cabinet, was appointed the first Director of Education.

Mr. Sweeney later recalled: *“The merger involved the provision of common services to all those students who previously did not have them. Libraries and gyms had to be built onto several schools. Consultants for music, art, physical education and religious education had to be provided for some schools for the first time. Extensive transportation routes had to be developed. Science equipment, library books, musical instruments and physical education equipment had to be upgraded in many schools. But, most important of all, almost 800 teachers had to learn to work together for the benefit of their students... This obviously could not be done overnight. The years 1969, 1970 and 1971 were times of challenge, frustration, compromise and growth. When I left in 1975, I knew it had all been worth it. We had one of the best Catholic school systems in Ontario. We had interested Trustees; we had dedicated and competent teachers; we had supportive parents; and we had well educated, Christian students. I would say that is a pretty good record.”*

The final piece of the puzzle snapped into place on June 12, 1984 when Ontario Premier William Davis rose in the Ontario Legislature and announced his Progressive Conservative government had *“undertaken a careful and fresh review of the outstanding issues surrounding public support for the Roman Catholic school system, and this afternoon I want to outline a new course we have decided to pursue”.*

The announcement was a bombshell: Catholic schools would henceforth be fully funded to Grade 13.

The Premier received a standing ovation from all three parties in the House. Among those standing and applauding was Liberal MPP John Sweeney.

As former Board Chair Louise Ervin has written: *“Even though the legislation had not passed yet and the money hadn't started flowing, the Catholic boards across the province, including ours, started implementing full secondary schools.*

Elementary schools in Cambridge and Waterloo were K to 6 schools. They had to become K to 8 schools. Our three Junior High Schools in Cambridge and Waterloo (St. Benedict, Msgr. Doyle and St. David) would now offer Grades 9 to 13 rather than 7 to 10. Kitchener's two private high schools (St. Jerome's and St. Mary's) – which were then operated by a standalone K-W Catholic High School Board -- had to be turned over to new combined Separate School Board.

We needed classrooms, desks, textbooks and teachers. Our enrolment was climbing fast. (1985: 15,183. 1989: 18,687). We needed proper gyms, science labs, sports fields, libraries, technology classes and equipment, department heads and consultants for secondary subjects. We needed to negotiate new contracts because now we had recognized secondary school teachers. We could now educate all our students with special needs and offer adult education programs and co-operative education. It was a whirlwind of activities”.

And the wind has not stopped whirling.

From those first beginnings in 1836, through to the granting of full funding in 1984, the Waterloo Catholic District School Board has grown to become the eighth-largest Catholic Board in Ontario, with 45 elementary schools, six high schools, five adult education facilities, a Newcomer Reception Centre, 3,500 full and part-time staff, 40,000 students and an annual budget approaching a quarter billion dollars.

Our schools encompass more than 400 acres of land and provide 2.5 million square feet of learning space for students.

Thirty per cent of Waterloo Region's schools are Catholic schools.

We've raised more than \$4.5 million for various charitable causes since 1998.

And we welcome students from 114 countries who speak more than 70 different languages.

Despite those impressive statistics, the true value added to the life of Waterloo Region over the last two centuries by Waterloo Region's Catholic Schools is immeasurable.

This is because, at its very core, Catholic education views human life as an integration of body, mind, and spirit -- where the search for knowledge is a lifelong spiritual and academic quest. What we expect of our Catholic graduates, therefore, is described not only in terms of knowledge and skills, but in terms of values, attitudes and actions.

So, when people question what – really – sets Catholic schools apart, they need look no further than how Waterloo Region's Catholic Schools embrace and promote the Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations.

Without reservation, we expect our graduates – each subject to their own abilities – to grow in all dimensions and ultimately leave our schools as:

- ✓ Discerning believers, formed in the Catholic faith community;
- ✓ Effective communicators;
- ✓ Reflective & creative thinkers;
- ✓ Self-directed, responsible, life-long learners;
- ✓ Collaborative contributors;
- ✓ Caring family members; and,
- ✓ Responsible citizens.

The pioneers who laid the foundations of Catholic education in Waterloo Region would expect nothing less.

Indeed, they would undoubtedly take great pride that today the original vision of Waterloo Region's Catholic Schools as “*heart of the community*” – born more than 175 years ago in the rugged wilderness of Upper Canada – is a firm reality and more strongly rooted than ever.

They would take great satisfaction that our commitment to *“learning, growing and transforming the world together as faithful disciples of the Risen Lord”* exists in the very DNA of the school system they founded.

They would happily approve of all we do to create *“success for each”* and *“a place for all”*.

And they would surely pray that our proud tradition of providing *“quality, inclusive, faith-based education”* to young and old alike will continue for another 175 years – and beyond.

With the prayerful dedication of Waterloo Region’s Catholic community...a rock solid commitment to educational excellence...an undying faith in serving the common good...and God’s good grace: it will!