A Call to Serve

Catholic Education Week is a time to celebrate. We will celebrate excellence in academics, sports and innovation, but as a Catholic community we will also celebrate exemplary practices of community, charity and solidarity.

As our Catholic school graduate expectations make clear, our schools are not merely an instrument for students to improve their future job prospects. The Fraser Report does not — should not — define us. Our schools are meant to support the formation of the whole person, providing opportunities for students to discover their talents in an environment which nurtures their mental, physical and spiritual growth for life.

So, in addition to imparting knowledge and wisdom, those who lead and teach in a Catholic school system have a special calling to be a witness of our faith, a witness of God’s love and a witness of God’s hope to our students.

As Pope Francis reminds us, “to love God and neighbour is not something abstract, but profoundly concrete: it means seeing in every person the face of the Lord to be served, to serve him concretely.”

This year’s Catholic Education Week theme challenges us to do just that by "Serving in the Love of Christ." Pope Francis has placed service to the poor at the centre of his ministry: taking the name of the saint who was "the man of poverty," desiring that our Church be "of and for the poor," and drawing global attention to "the scandal of poverty."

Poverty is a reality for 1 in 3 children in Toronto and affects an estimated 30,000 Toronto Catholic District School Board students, well above provincial and national averages. Overall, recent immigrants fare the worst with 46% living in poverty, according to the Alliance for a Poverty-Free Toronto. The ratio of Toronto families living in housing that is too small, needs repairs or is unaffordable is 1 in 5. The average food bank client has just $5.83 per day in after-rent disposable income. The average time a family waits for an affordable home in Toronto is 6.4 years.

Few professionals are more keenly aware of the consequences of childhood poverty than those involved in education. In his book *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity and the Hidden Power of Character*, Paul Tough disputes the assumption that cognitive skills — those measured in I.Q. tests — are the primary drivers of success. He says non-cognitive skills — persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, grit and self-confidence — are more crucial. But it is in these areas of skill development that children living in poverty face the most challenges.

Studies show that these children confront food insecurity and hunger, poor access to health services, a higher likelihood of poor health and exposure to environmental contaminants, a lack of safe, stable and affordable housing, an increased risk of impairments in vision, hearing, speech, mobility, dexterity and cognition. They are more susceptible to low self-esteem and associated mental health difficulties, the consequences of which can be depression, frustrations and anger.
Support for students living in poverty takes different forms at our Catholic schools. For the last 25 years, the Angel Foundation for Learning, the charitable arm of the TCDSB, has provided assistance to students in need. Currently it provides financial support to more than 35,000 students, disbursing more than $2 million annually through nutrition programs, a social work emergency fund, a vision fund, school allocations, and student bursaries and awards.

The TCDSB has 143 programs (breakfast, morning meal, snack, lunch) at 123 sites, run by about 1,000 volunteers, and feeding over 30,000 students daily. Struggling students are given support through Fifth Block, Junior Literacy Intervention, after school and summer literacy and numeracy programs, and Head Start programs. Principals, parents and students can connect with social workers, settlement workers, chaplains and community relation officers. Most secondary schools have both "Stop the Stigma" student committees focused on the critical issue of mental health as well as summer transition courses for Grade 8 students that welcome and orient them to high school. We are grateful to have many community partners, including the Archdiocese of Toronto, Catholic Charities, Toronto Public Health, Toronto Public Libraries, Boys and Girls Clubs, the St. Vincent de Paul Society and the Knights of Columbus.

TCDSB’s Agatha-Julia Nemes and Carol Soper have written Ten Opportunities: Practical Ideas for Supporting Students and Families Living in Poverty. It outlines ways to provide a voice to students living in poverty, to understand the personal challenges facing these families, to see them as "with potential" instead of "at risk" and to welcome and support parental participation – ultimately, to demonstrate that our schools are a place of belonging and hope.

Ours is a mission of education rooted in the love of Christ – and that is something to celebrate.

(Davis is a school trustee and Chair of the Toronto Catholic District School Board.)